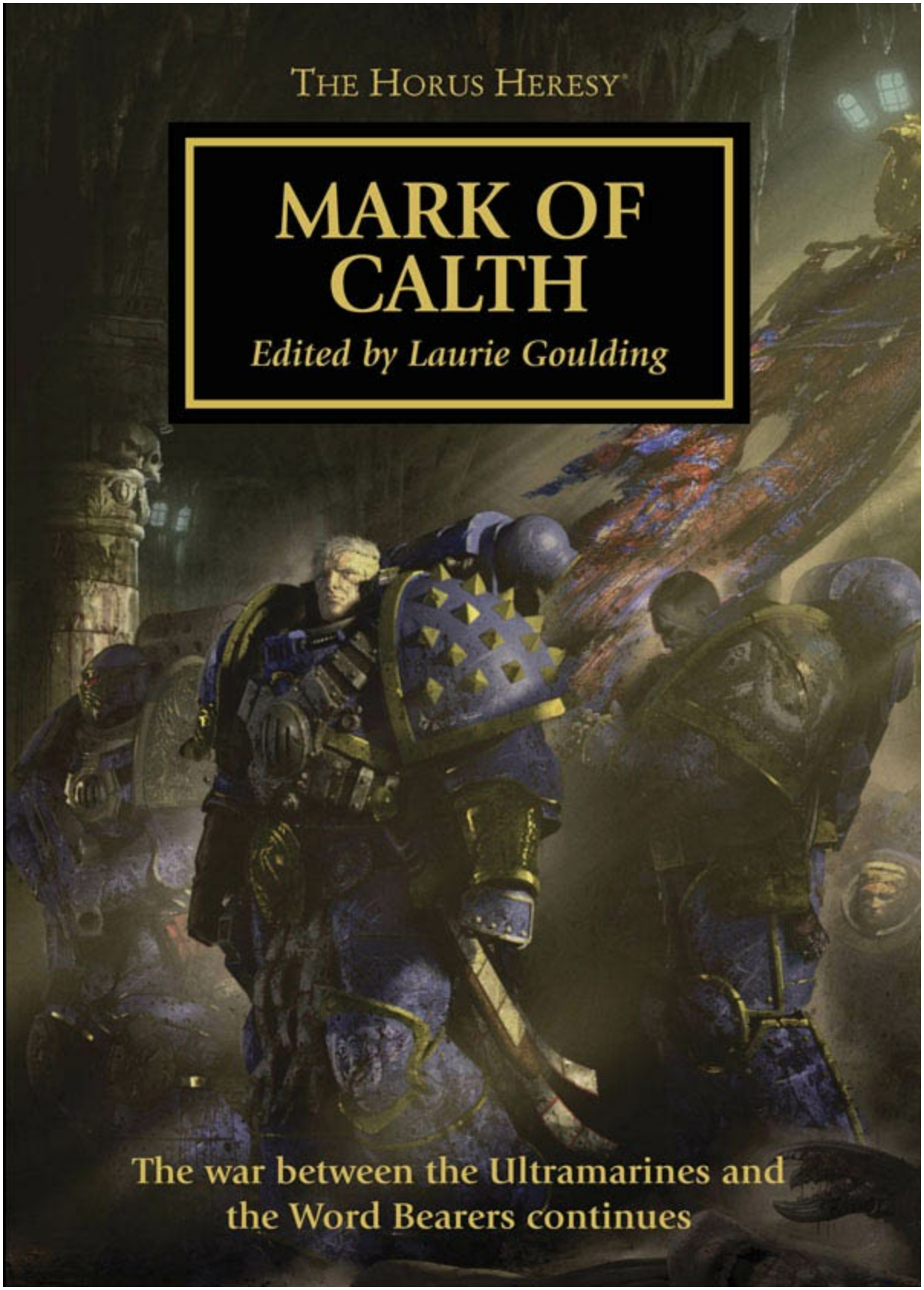
A DEEPER DARKNESS

Rob Sanders


THE HORUS HERESY
MARK OF CALTH
Edited by Laurie Goulding
The war between the Ultramarines and the Word Bearers continues

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THE HORUS HERESY®

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended. The Age of Darkness has begun.

It is the doom of empires that they forget, and those that consign their victories and failures alike to oblivion are destined to repeat them forevermore. An empire should honour its history.

With the treachery of our brothers revealed and the Mark of Calth measured in the beating of loyal, legionary hearts, we gather and collate. Witnesses to the end of a world give us their accounts. Enemies are interrogated. Communiqués, datastreams, status reports – we will read them all. We will scrutinise. We will analyse. We will reach judgement, both upon others and upon ourselves. We will conclude the whole truth of those dark times, even if it takes us a thousand years.

The XIII Legion has not forgotten – nor will it ever forget – what happened at noble Calth. We fight with the weight of Ultramar's history upon our shoulders. It is our burden. It is our honour.

– Roboute Guilliman, *In Plenitudine Temporis* (In the Fullness of Time), from the General Introduction, ref:71.1

THE SHARDS OF EREBUS

Guy Haley

The chanting of Erebus's lesser, human priests reached its height as he unwrapped the anathame blade from its blessed shrouding. Reverently the Dark Apostle lifted the weapon – one hand upon the hilt, the other beneath the blade with an open palm so that his flesh would not touch its deadly edge.

Crafted from neither metal nor stone, it had characteristics of both, and was warm to the touch as though alive. This was the weapon that he had stolen from the interex, the blade that had wounded the Warmaster and turned him to the true way. It was a holy artefact, and key to a plot that spanned tens of thousands of years.

And now he must violate it.

He presented the sword to the statues of the four powers that dominated the sacellum space of the *Destiny's Hand*. He called out prayers and incantations, saluting the dread lords of the warp, each in turn. A row of eight cult priests bearing censers and icons followed his every move, adding a chorus of their own voices to his supplications. They fell behind Erebus in procession as he walked solemnly to the high altar of the Octed that dominated the nave. The Dark Apostle had little time for common mortals, but these priests were among his most trusted servants.

What he was doing here was to remain secret until the allotted time. The doors were barred. His bodyguards stood watch outside.

Before the great brass and iron star had been set an anvil, specially cast and sanctified for the sole purpose of this ritual. Cowled artisans stood in readiness at either side – Guldire, chief among the Dark Apostle's Warpsmiths, shadowed by his foremost apprentice. They would aid him in this task, directing his blows and channelling away the fell energies that might yet be unleashed.

The Warpsmiths did not flinch as Erebus pointed the terrible blade at them. He took the hilt in both hands, and raised the anathame, point upwards, to his forehead. With his eyes closed and hushed prayers upon his quick lips, he placed the weapon upon the anvil – the holy weapon that had brought Horus Lupercal into the light.

The priests downed their icons and doused their torches. They brought out their athames from their sleeves. Their chanting grew deeper.

Erebus took up a rune-inscribed hammer from the apprentice Warpsmith. The head came to a brutal point, like that of a pick, and it crackled with the subdued energy of a disruption field.

The Dark Apostle gazed down at the blade for the longest moment. It seemed a sacrilege what he must do, but the weapon had served its purpose.

In this form, at least.

He pinned the blade down firmly. Muttering outlawed spells torn from the minds of dead kinebrach metallurgists, he raised the hammer above his head, and brought it down hard. The hammer's head flared with light as it connected with the anathame's arcane alloys. There was a mighty bang, and a terrific scream as though the weapon itself cried out in pain, and the priests sank their ritual athames into their own hearts.

They did this willingly. What Erebus had asked of them was a great honour, the first anointing of a new weapon against the False Emperor. Their blood flowed onto the stone flags as they fell, their souls running joyously into the warp as their hymnal ceased in choking death rattles. He prayed that their weak spirits would prove sufficient offering.

The sword writhed in his hand; although his eyes did not see it move, he felt it shiver and squirm, as muscular and deadly as a snake.

He called out in the black speech of the kinebrach, and felt the air shift under the fell burden of the sounds. He brought the hammer down again, and again.

A crack like thunder. A flash of greenish light.

Erebus reeled back, the hammer spinning from his hand to land in the pooling blood upon the deck. He nearly went down himself, pushed away by the portion of the weapon's holy might that he had released. His muscled arm was numb to the shoulder, his hand sparkling with electric agony.

He approached the anvil again cautiously. The sword rang with a fading note. Next to it lay a finger-length sliver of the blade's weird alloys. The anathame shimmered with heat haze; it was diminished, yet whole. Erebus felt awe at this god-slayer, this tool of the end times.

He smiled with satisfaction and looked to his Warpsmiths.

'Take the shard. Place it in the medium.'

Guldire bowed his hooded head, and deftly plucked the sliver from the anvil with a pair of black iron tongs. It hissed and spat in the chill air. He produced a small jar of blood-grown ruby, filled with a liquid of an even darker red, and in the shard of metal went. The Warpsmith screwed down the vessel's lid, sealing it with black wax and pressed symbols.

Erebus rubbed at his shoulder. He ignored his pain. Pain was the least of what would test him in the months and years to come. He picked up the hammer, grasped the hilt of the anathame, and spoke once more the spells of making and unmaking.

The hammer fell.

Seven more times did Erebus break the dark blade; seven more slivers he commended to his Warpsmiths, until finally he was done. The sword's anguish faded.

The sacellum was silent at last. His ears rang. He lifted his head with effort. Sweat dripped from his face; he was febrile, his arms leaden.

'*It is done*,' he said weakly, though there was much yet to do. The air was tainted – the sacellum practically thrummed with outrage, its animus offended by Erebus's sacrilege. The universe itself knew that what he had done was an affront to the natural order, and that he had done it for his own gain.

He revelled in reality's discomfiture. He was a Dark Apostle, First Chaplain and bearer of the true faith. His was a higher purpose – the will of the gods themselves guided his hand.

Give me strength now, he thought, to embrace my destiny. Already events were in motion, and the days of the XIII Legion were numbered. He had seen the need to embroider his own goals into Lorgar's plans. The fracturing of the anathame was but the first step down a longer path.

His gaze came to rest upon the diminished blade. He would dispose of it, conveying it on as he had originally been instructed.

'Take the shards to the forge,' he ordered the Warpsmiths. 'Send for me when they are ready.'

Within his sanctuary, Quor Vondar, Chief Librarian-sorcerer of the Word Bearers, let his psychic senses unfurl. The crude matter of realspace dropped away, and he gloried in the revealed majesty of the warp.

Had there been anyone else with him in the small chamber, they would have seen a slow smile spread across his face.

Here was power, the very realm of the gods. Its tides caressed him, the warmth of its living energies invigorating his body and mind. Fearsome entities stalked the depths, but he paid them no heed; he was the anointed of the Legion, and his faith in the revealed powers of the universe was his shield. These fleshless daemons that swam the sea of souls were lesser servants – they had no souls

of their own. They were not so mighty as he.

Chosen of the gods.

The weakest among the warp's denizens bowed to him and sought his favour. They whispered their fealty, they promised great power and insight if only he would set them free. *Open your mind!* they sang. *Let us in! Let us in!*

Quor Vondar did not open his mind. His was not the way of possession, for he was above such crude displays of devotion. Let the Gal Vorbak court the bottom-feeders – he could wield the energies of the warp directly. He could lay waste to his enemies with but a thought. He could channel the might of the gods into a glorious blast of ruin. No, he had no need of what the daemons promised, and he dismissed them with contempt. Their minds slunk back, whimpering, into the undifferentiated roil of the empyrean.

Oh, how wrong the Emperor was to deny this to his servants. How very, very wrong. The so-called Master of Mankind was a liar, a false prophet, keeping the true nature of power hidden. A paper god, not worthy of the Word Bearers' worship. He had denied their veneration, Quor Vondar suspected, simply to make them crave his blessing more, forcing the faithful to kneel in the dust of Monarchia. Now the XVII Legion understood, and the power the Emperor sought to keep for himself was theirs instead.

Fool. He would die. So sure of his sons' mewling obedience, he was likely still ignorant of the war, gathering apace after Horus's masterful victories in the Isstvan system. He was blissfully ignorant, but soon he would pay for his selfishness.

Something disturbed Quor Vondar's meditation. He sensed no unusual movement in the empyrean, and no warnings were cried by his bound sentinels, but there was… something.

Muttering cantrips of warding to guard his exit from the warp, he slipped his mind from its unholy communion and opened his eyes.

He was alone in the sanctuary. The uncanny beings that stood watch over his meditating form remained quiet.

An unexpected draft caused the candles upon his prayer shrine to flicker. He stood, his brocaded robes whispering, and… there, again. He turned in a circle as he followed the movement, a wave of yellow flames guttering atop those black waxen pillars. Twice it went about his chamber, light glittering insolently off the statuary as if daring him to guess its cause. Still his guardians raised no alarm.

Now Quor Vondar's courage shrivelled. He suppressed the urge to cry out, turning the unborn words to a snarl of anger. He crept through the shadowy space, pausing to genuflect before the great Octed. That seemed to calm the disturbance. The movement ceased.

What could this betoken? Perhaps it was a message, a test from the gods. He liked to think himself so important. Still, perplexed, he turned back to the centre of the room.

He gasped, his hand catching on his robes as it sought the handle of his dagger.

In the centre of the room was a knife, plunged into the centre of his warding circle – the very spot where he had been seated until moments ago.

Quor Vondar hesitated as he approached it. An aura of malice spilled from its black blade. The knife appeared to be of a dark metal, knapped like flint, and yet it had been plunged into the plasteel plates of the deck without breaking. Dark red ribbons inscribed with holy texts trailed from its leather-bound handle.

Pinned to the floor by its point was a message, handwritten upon rich parchment.

Quor Vondar recognised the penmanship. It was that of the Dark Apostle Erebus, adviser of Horus,

absent from the Word Bearers fleet these past months. Where he had gone, none knew.

Quor Vondar mastered his unease, grasped the hilt of the knife and drew it easily from the deck. The weapon seemed to tingle in his hand. He plucked the message from the blade and began to read.

He frowned, and crushed the parchment into a ball.

'*Let* him summon me,' the Librarian-sorcerer muttered. 'We shall see who is the master.'

Phael Rabor started from his slumber, coming to full wakefulness in less than a heartbeat. Something was amiss. He leapt up from his pallet. He stood unclothed, senses straining, muscles tense and ready for combat.

His cell was dark. The ship's engines vibrated almost imperceptibly through the metal beneath his bare feet as it pushed its way through the warp. The drone of machinery within the hull troubled the edges of his augmented hearing, and the scent of unwashed bodies – both legionary and mortal serf – lingered in the corridor outside.

There was no one there now, yet his feeling of disquiet persisted, a sense of reality off kilter. Rabor made for the switch by his pallet to activate the single ceiling mounted lumen-strip, but something gave him pause and he went to the one by the doorway instead.

Light filled the chamber, and he found his eye drawn to the other switch.

Where his hand would have passed, a knife was embedded in the wall. Pushed up the blade, near to the hilt, was a message.

He snarled.

'*Erebus*…'

Davin was as the First Chaplain remembered it, with wide plains running into the red deserts beyond. The Thunderhawk startled great herds of ungulates into stampede as it swept over the savannah.

'Keep low,' he ordered the pilots. 'I do not wish to announce my presence.'

'As you wish, Lord Erebus.'

They were far from the civilisation sheltering in the mountain valleys. Out here on the plains were only the herds and the nomads that hunted them.

He chose a hollow in the grasslands for their landing site and had them put the gunship down, before gathering his belongings and making for the lower deck. The five warriors of his bodyguard bowed before him as he descended.

The ship settled into its landing gear and the forward ramp cranked open, letting in rays of dazzling sunlight. Erebus wore no battle-plate, only the rough robes of a mendicant priest. He was an apostle of the truth, and the truth demanded humility, as much as that might chafe at his usual sense of grandeur. Upon his back was a small pack of supplies, enough for a few days – this too was of simple manufacture, rough hessian stitched into the gaps where use and time had frayed it. An athame gleamed at his waist, utilitarian and unadorned. The only item of ostentation about him was the roll of rich velvet he had slung over his shoulder, but this was hidden, covered in grubby sackcloth tied with a cord.

'You are to return to the *Destiny's Hand*,' he informed his men. 'Shipmaster Voregar has orders to rejoin the fleet. Wait for me there.'

'How will you return, lord?' asked Undil. 'Will you contact the garrison? We are far from–'

'Do not concern yourself with that, brother-sergeant. I will return before we reach Ultramar.'

The sergeant paused, uncertain. He bowed again. 'As you say, my lord.'

Erebus stepped out onto the dry grass of the savannah. He trudged to a safe distance as the engines

of the gunship whined up to full power. The wash of exhaust set fires in the grass.

He watched as the Thunderhawk banked, aimed its blunt prow at the heavens and rapidly ascended. The echoes of its passage rolled off across the plains, and he was alone. The sough of the wind, the crackle of burning grass and the lowing of panicked animals in the distance took its place.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. The air was hot, redolent of parched soil and animals under the smell of smoke. Here, in the Davin system, his greatest plan had been set in motion by the turning of Horus. His return was a homecoming of sorts.

The flames were spreading in the dry grass, fanned by the wind. Erebus shifted his burden upon his back, and began to walk.

The chamber was large enough to accommodate more than a hundred legionaries, and yet it struggled to contain the collected egos of the five Word Bearers who now occupied it. They were the greatest of the Legion's ranks, clad in all their regalia as if for war. Their stares spoke of open distrust; some were as close as blood-kin, but in recent times they had vied hard with one another as the face of the XVII Legion changed, and brotherhood crumbled quickly before ambition's onslaught.

Kor Phaeron, with all his grand titles, certainly considered himself to be the head of such a gathering. His arrogance was palpable to the rest; Morpal Cxir, Phael Rabor, Foedral Fell and Hol Beloth all chafed beneath his conceit. He bestowed a smile upon them that was perilously close to a sneer as they gathered around the innermost of the room's eight concentric tables, each taking their place at a point of the Chaos star set into the granite surface.

But Kor Phaeron's expression lost all pretence of benevolence as Quor Vondar strode into the room. His dark eyes glittered.

Vondar approached the table. 'My brothers,' he said, though the acknowledgment was brusque to the point of insolence. He stood by one of the three empty chairs, but did not sit. His entrance had ended what little conversation there had been.

Kor Phaeron stared at him hard. 'Sorcerer, your power extends deep into the warp, but we expect a little more civility. You will address us correctly.'

'I give such civility as is warranted.'

Vondar cast a black-bladed knife onto the table. The weapon skittered across the surface inscriptions, and came to a spinning halt in front of the Dark Cardinal himself. 'What is the meaning of this?' he demanded.

Kor Phaeron looked slowly from the blade to Vondar as though he were a teacher who would coax the realisation of an obvious fact from a slow pupil.

'This is none of my doing, Master Vondar. This is the work of the Dark Apostle.'

'Erebus does nothing without your knowledge and your collusion!' the sorcerer snapped. 'I am not some lowly menial to be–'

'*We are not savages!*' Kor Phaeron snarled, and smashed an armour-clad fist into the table, cracking the surface. 'Address me correctly, sorcerer. Do me the proper courtesy, or I will do far worse to you.'

Vondar's mouth opened. Whatever he was going to say went unsaid. 'My lord. First Captain. Dark Cardinal. Master of the Faith, I apologise,' he said, though the words carried little sincerity.

Kor Phaeron nodded. 'Now, *brother*,' he breathed, 'I advise you to sit. Sit!'

'My lord.' Vondar took his place. His comrades muttered, and eyed him as warily as they did one another.

Reclining in his chair, Kor Phaeron waved a hand dismissively. 'Besides, you speak of older

times, Chief Librarian,' he said. 'Now Erebus is a law unto himself. I am not his keeper. I am ignorant of the purpose of these blades, as you are. He would not tell me what he intends.'

'My lord – you have seen him, then?' said Hol Beloth. 'Where has he been these last months?'

Before Kor Phaeron could answer, Vondar spoke again.

'Blades? You speak of *many* blades?'

'We all carry them, lord,' said Phael Rabor. 'Observe.' He pulled out his own knife and set it upon the table with a click. One after another, the others did the same.

Foedral Fell regarded each in turn. 'I thank my lords for allaying my fears,' he said. 'I too had believed that I had somehow been singled out.' Fell gave a wry grin, and rested his gauntleted hands upon the table. 'To feel noticed by Lord Erebus is to feel as a fly noticed by the spider.'

They shared a grim laugh.

'Well then, esteemed brothers,' said Morpal Cxir. 'It is all of us – all of us who were chosen to lead the assault on the XIII Legion.' He toyed with his own blade, fascinated by it.

Rabor frowned. 'All of us?'

Cxir nodded. 'Such a gift. I expect it is meant as a great honour.' His voice was level, though his gaze did not leave the edge of the knife. 'Have you not felt the power of them? These are no mere ritual athames, but true tools of the Gods.'

'How came each of you by yours, then?' Vondar demanded. He stared at the other blades suspiciously.

Kor Phaeron scoffed. 'You still fear some unknown conspiracy?' His aged, gene-forged face moved unnaturally, the skin too tight – a result of his imperfect elevation to the ranks of the Legiones Astartes. 'My brother's distrust does not befit one of his rank.'

Vondar glared. 'You ask me to honour you among this company, and then offer me nothing but disrespect in return. What of courtesy now, eh? Do not speak to me so, *my lord*.'

'I will speak to you howsoever I choose, Master Vondar.'

The Librarian gritted his teeth, and rose sharply from his seat. 'What gives you the right? You, who are not truly one of us, and can never be. You are no son of Lorgar! Not as we are, nor any other brother legionary, down to even the most lowly novitiate.'

Kor Phaeron stood, and the shadows around him seemed to deepen. 'No, you are correct in that. I cannot claim to be your brother as this… *rabble* can.' His voice echoed with the thunder of eternity, and his eyes flashed with spectral warp-light. 'I am not Lorgar's son. *I am his father*. You would do well not to forget it.'

Quor Vondar sank back into his seat, though the Dark Cardinal's gaze did not waver. The scent of brimstone hung in the air.

Slowly, the tension faded.

Cxir cleared his throat. 'My lords, please. I will answer Master Vondar's question, for it is one that we have all no doubt considered.'

He looked to the others before continuing.

'Mine came from nowhere. I was at table, preparing to feast with my chosen veterans. We bowed our heads to give thanks to the lifegiver Nurgle. When we raised them, there it was.'

'Aye,' said Fell, raising his own blade. 'As if from the very air.'

'But how can this be?' asked Rabor. 'I am not so gifted in the dark arts as many of you, but I confess that I did not believe Erebus either to be capable of such magick.'

Morpal Cxir shook his head. 'All that which stems from the Dark Apostle must be approached with caution. He sees things which many do not, and his ways are not always those of the Seventeenth.'

‘The writing was his. The summons are his,’ said Vondar. ‘I will not be a pawn in some unrevealed scheme.’

‘You saw him enter your chambers then?’ said Kor Phaeron slyly.

Vondar shook his head.

‘Sensed him, at the least, oh great Chief of Librarians? You regale us so often with tales of your arcane might.’

Cxir raised a calming hand. He did not mock as Kor Phaeron did. ‘And your might is not to be denied, Master Vondar. But how did he gain entrance to your sanctuary without attracting your attention?’

Vondar’s face wrinkled. He was shamed, but could not say so immediately.

‘Come now, sorcerer – it is a vital part of the puzzle,’ said Kor Phaeron.

‘My lords, I am forced to admit that I saw and felt nothing. Only a draft of air at the blade’s passing. My senses and my guardians failed me.’

Kor Phaeron slapped the table and laughed. It was an unpleasant sound.

Vondar’s face flushed with anger. ‘How then, *if I may ask*, did the great Lord Kor Phaeron come by his gift, then?’

‘Why, Lord Erebus himself walked in through the door and presented it to me, and together we planned this merry little gathering. I am, after all, the primarch’s chosen commander of our next campaign.’

The First Captain’s implication that the rest of them were beneath Erebus’s respect was plain, and intended to be so. Quor Vondar’s fury was writ equally plainly upon his face.

‘Then what are they for?’ muttered Hol Beloth. ‘Surely you, my lord – as first among us – must know.’

‘He would not tell me for what purpose these athames are intended,’ admitted Kor Phaeron, waving away his obvious annoyance at the fact. ‘Only which worthy brethren were intended to receive them. Who am I to deny the Dark Apostle his theatrics?’

Cxir again raised his hand. ‘Let us not bicker, then, but compare them. Perhaps there is some relevance to their differences?’

‘Aye,’ said Beloth, his voice resonating with equal parts enthusiasm and wariness.

They placed the daggers points facing inwards. Although they were all similar – hilts bound in black leather or wire, marked with golden runes and tied with devotional ribbons – the blades were all markedly different. Crooked, or straighter. One forked. Another with waved edges. All were, however, of the same flinty black metal that pained the eyes.

‘Six daggers,’ said Fell. ‘If these are truly tools of Chaos, then there might at least be eight.’

‘Lord Erebus will surely carry the seventh,’ said Hol Beloth.

‘That still leaves one, captain,’ pointed out Rabor.

Quor Vondar frowned. ‘All of the Legion who have been chosen to command the coming assault are present, barring the Dark Apostle himself.’

‘Indeed!’ said Erebus as he strode into the chamber. The sudden sound of his voice caused Fell and Cxir to rise from their seats. ‘And it is this noble legionary who will carry the eighth.’

Another warrior walked behind him: Sergeant Kolos Undil, leader of Erebus’s cadre of bodyguards.

‘A mere sergeant?’ said Rabor angrily. ‘You disrespect us, Lord Erebus.’

Hol Beloth frowned. ‘I – unlike my brothers, it seems – do wholly appreciate the honour of these fine athame blades, Lord Erebus. But it seems to lessen the gift, to put a mere sergeant on a footing

with a captain…'

Erebus took a seat at the table. 'Gifting the faithful with such a weapon, even though he be a *mere sergeant*, does nothing to diminish the potency of the rest, nor the honour in carrying one.' He gestured to the last empty space, bidding Undil sit. The sergeant took his chair with unhurried grace, and looked into the eyes of his superiors without fear. 'Undil is as faithful as any of you,' Erebus added, taking care to nod respectfully to Kor Phaeron as he did so.

The others were guarded. Undil was a renowned warrior, as devout as his master and almost as devious.

'I do not like this, Dark Apostle,' said Fell, finally.

'Nor I,' said Cxir. 'There is ambition enough in this room as it is. Do you seek to set us all upon one other in open combat or honour duels?'

Undil inclined his head.

Erebus laughed.

'You are all already worthy of this honour, my lords, as is Undil.' Erebus smiled enigmatically, the scar across his throat a pale pink mirror of it. 'And now, my lord Kor Phaeron, shall we begin? I believe now is the time to review our strategies for the assault on Calth.'

Beloth raised his hands, exasperated. 'Come now – we all know the plan, Dark Apostle, and our parts in it.'

'There is more I have yet to add,' said Erebus archly.

'Then add it.'

'He will, he will,' said Kor Phaeron. 'It is not in the nature of our First Chaplain to employ such drama with no final revelation.'

Then he turned to Erebus, and his manner became more firm.

'He assured me that he would explain himself, and so *he will*.'

Akshub's face betrayed only a flicker of apprehension when Erebus walked into the nomad camp. To her credit, she alone stood her ground as the tribesmen backed away from him, the giant who came out of the night.

The locals were wiry, repulsive creatures – devolved dregs of humanity that appeared more beast than man. Erebus despised them, even though they had proven their worth in the past.

The priestess eyed him as he approached.

'You have found me quickly,' she muttered. Her widely spaced, dark eyes were unreadable, the reflected flames of the campfires dancing in them.

Erebus halted. 'You knew I had survived?'

The scar on his throat itched as he spoke. He had been waiting for this moment for a long time. He would relish it.

However, her reply robbed him of any satisfaction.

'I foresaw your return. I have been waiting for you.'

He reined in his rising anger. Now was not the time for revenge, but he could not resist the urge to dominate her. He loomed over her in the fiery twilight. '*You tried to kill me*.'

She tilted her head and pursed her lips. Bone beads clicked in her hair. Her appearance was more barbaric than when Erebus had last seen her – in the depths of the Delphos, where she had slit his throat.

'And yet I did not, noble warrior,' she said. 'I had to spill your blood for the spell to succeed. This should have been clear to you – the last act of faith.' She took a step towards him. 'The war has

begun, as you and your masters desired.'

'It has.'

She shrugged. 'Then all is well. It is as I told you. Your death was necessary.'

'It was… an unwelcome surprise. You meant to slay me.'

She was wary, but her pride masked her fear. 'And now you seek vengeance? All I did was what was asked of me. You should take care when asking favours of the greater powers, warrior.'

'Then I shall be more precise with my words in future, seeress,' Erebus said. He slipped his pack from his back and set it down in the dust at his feet. 'I am weary, for I have walked a long way to find you. Can you not offer me some refreshment? Some water, perhaps?'

'You are not here to kill me, then?'

Erebus folded his arms. 'If you can see the future, then you know the answer to that.'

She smiled enigmatically, an ugly expression on so debased a face. 'What do you know of what I see, my lord? I will tell you what I see. I see that you have grown powerful. You have done well. But know this, *hand-of-destiny* – there will always be matters of which you will remain ignorant, no matter how great you become.'

Erebus nodded contritely.

'You are correct, Akshub, and though it pains me to say so, it does not make it less true. That is why I have come – to learn from you. Your power humbled me in that moment, and so in you I recognise a greater knowledge than my own.'

He sank to his knees and bowed his head.

'Allow me to become your acolyte.'

He reached for the roll of sackcloth, and untied the cord about it. Reverently, he spread out the black velvet within, and adjusted the contents as it lay on the ground.

Glinting in the firelight were eight knives: athames of exquisite, brutal craftsmanship.

Now that surprised her. His satisfaction returned.

'*This is* – was – *the anathame*?' she whispered.

'Shards knapped from the blade by my own hand, in accordance with the old rituals.' He spread his arms wide, his palms upwards. 'I grew them in the blood of the Neverborn, and fashioned them into these fine implements – each alike, but no two the same.'

She looked up, her expression guarded. 'How did you learn this?'

'The forging was simple, because the gods demanded it should be so. You of all people, mighty Akshub, should know that their will cannot be defied.'

She wrinkled her nose.

'Their will? Your will, I think. And now you want me to reward you for this sacrilege?' The bones in her hair rattled as she shook her head. 'No. Never.'

'The gods willed it, seeress.'

She stared at him, and let out a long sigh. She scratched at her scalp with a ragged fingernail, and sat down with much grumbling. Her limbs had stiffened since their last meeting. 'Maybe, maybe,' she muttered. 'What would you have from me?'

He prostrated himself before her once more. 'Help me. Help me to win the war and bring the light of Chaos to every corner of the galaxy. Mighty Akshub, I beseech you, teach me the way to the paths between worlds.'

Even as the words left his lips, he smiled into the dirt beneath his face.

Akshub spent the night in communion with her patron spirits. Her tent she heated to almost unbearable

levels, piling the fire high with dung cake. She sealed the space tightly – door and window flaps, and the opening at the peak that would normally let out the smoke. The place was filled with a choking reek long before she began casting her herbs and powders into the flames and inhaling the thick vapours.

Erebus watched the old witch perform her magic, his eyes streaming. He strove to stay vigilant, to learn what he could, but her chanting invaded every corner of his mind and led him to places he could not later recall.

He did not sleep. Of that he was sure.

Suddenly, it was light and the fire was out. Erebus blinked. The door flap had been opened behind him. Outside, the dirt was scuffed, with various belongings strewn about. The tribesmen had fled, although how long ago was impossible to tell.

Akshub jabbed him hard in the shoulder with her finger.

'Very well, noble warrior. We go. I will teach you what you desire. The gods will it.' She glanced at the velvet roll containing the eight athames, before ducking out of the tent.

She burned down the remains of the camp, then led Erebus across the savannah for eight days and nights. During the hours of darkness, when the great, sickly moon of Davin hung heavy in the sky, she told him more of the gods' own realms. She took him into trances, guiding his mind into the fringes of the empyrean, showing him the secret ways by which a mind might pass beyond.

'We are servants of the gods, and so we go more easily,' she said. 'But they are capricious, and there are many dark things of lower consequence that dwell within that ocean and hunger for our soul-fire. You must be wary at all times. Trust nothing, think nothing. Feel nothing. All you can imagine can destroy you.'

'Then what protects us?' he asked. 'Why was I not devoured when you sent me that way before?'

She looked away, into the mauve darkness of Davin's night sky.

'You think perhaps your pretty inks? Your special words? Or do you think yourself favoured, "*hand-of-destiny*"?' She turned back to him, almost angry. 'No, none of these things, Lord Erebus. Not one will protect you. We are protected because we do the work of the gods, and because of our devotion. Our ambition, our will, our determination. These things are pleasing to them. That is why you passed freely before.'

'Will I be able to do so again?'

She did not speak, but prodded idly at the dirt with a stiff stalk of grass. She glanced again at the roll containing the knives.

'I know what you and the golden one intend to do. I have foreseen that you will attempt to call down the Ruinstorm upon the galaxy and stir the oceans of time into a tempest. This is why you are here – not only to pass the veil that divides. You will gather your ships about you and sail unhindered whilst others founder. That is what you seek to learn.' She sniffed, and muttered to herself. 'Mighty sorcery indeed.'

He did not deny it. 'Will I succeed?'

Her grass stalk scratched the dust, writing things only she could see.

'We shall see,' she said abruptly. 'We shall see.'

By day they walked, heading for a range of black mountains in the distance. They saw no other living soul as they went. Erebus thought back to the last time he had set foot upon the planet's surface.

'The plains and settlements are almost empty,' he observed. 'But of course – the exodus has already begun, has it not?' With a smug grin, he directed his words at the priestess's back as she walked. 'Tell me, why did you not join them? Why did you not take your tribe into the stars, like so

many of the other priests?'

Akshub did not respond.

The eight legionaries talked at length of the plans for the coming battle: the ambush of Guilliman's hated Ultramarines that would open wide the way to Terra. Their defeat would be a blow to the morale of the so-called loyalists – the realm of Ultramar that Guilliman ruled was a model of what the Emperor said he had always intended for the Imperium.

Lies, all of it, thought Erebus. The Emperor sought only his own aggrandisement, and would abandon mankind to rot. Had he not hidden himself away for millennia? Mankind would fall as the eldar had fallen, its potential unrealised, all because of the Emperor's desire for apotheosis. This had been revealed to him long, long ago.

Talk of ambush, of scrapcode, of deceit and murder washed over him. They all knew the strategy back to front. It had been almost a year since Lorgar had first tasked him and the others with the destruction of the XIII Legion, and Kor Phaeron's plans had been long in the making. He let the Dark Cardinal talk, as he so liked to do. So sure of himself, this half-man – so sure of his adopted son's affection for him. He was prideful at his command of the attack.

But Erebus knew that a thorn of irritation dug at him too: his own refusal, until now, to reveal the purpose of these particular athames. This pleased the Dark Apostle. He and Kor Phaeron, once close conspirators, were more often at loggerheads of late.

He watched the others. Quor Vondar, swollen with confidence. The embittered Foedral Fell, angered by duties he deemed unbefitting of his station. Hol Beloth, thirsting for power. Murderous Rabor, cautious Cxir. All were wrapped up in their own concerns in some way, but only Morpal Cxir looked genuinely troubled. The attack was essential to the winning of the greatest war, but it would be costly, no matter that surprise and fear would be on their side.

As Erebus looked around the circle of Space Marines, arguing and manoeuvring for whatever small glories were to be had, he wondered – and not for the first time – if Lorgar had meant leadership in this battle to be an honour. This campaign was crucial, but it would also prove bloody. Not all of them would survive. Perhaps Cxir, always glancing at his blade, was also beginning to see the truth of it.

No matter. Erebus would complete his part in the ritual. The great spell had been prepared, and the rest of the Legion was already on its way across Ultramar. He had the place for the summoning marked. His acolytes were gathered, and the myriad names of the daemons he would call forth were committed to his memory.

All was ready.

Cxir looked up at him, wordlessly. Erebus nodded.

In the ruins of an old temple in the foothills tended by grim-faced sentinels, Akshub began to teach him the way to open the skin of reality.

Erebus's first attempts were clumsy and humiliating. He would pass Akshub's knife through the air as instructed, only rarely causing the tear he required, and then it would be too small or too short-lived. Many temple slaves were violated and sacrificed before he had mastered even this first part of the ritual.

'To move one's mind into the empyrean is one thing, warrior, but to go bodily into that place is another.' She rapped the back of his head for effect. 'You must concentrate. Learn! Watch!'

She took back her knife. She muttered her words, and slid it along an angle that earthly dimensions

could not describe. A crack of light split the air.

With a feral smile, Akshub disappeared.

Erebus noted again that *she* needed no sacrifice to open the way and, for a moment, his resolve wavered.

Patience, he told himself.

She returned as she always did, bringing with her yet another entranced victim for Erebus to bleed for the glory of the gods, and then he would try again.

At night Akshub kept him awake, forcing him to meditate to clear his mind and safeguard his soul. She armoured his spirit with incantations, but the lack of sleep began to take its toll, the genetic gifts of the Legiones Astartes notwithstanding.

The pile of glassy-eyed slave heads that she was making on the far side of the temple – the mark for his re-entry into the material realm – grew steadily.

Then, on the sixty-fourth day, he succeeded.

He made the pass with the knife, weary beyond telling. He was drained by the endless repetition of the spell, annoyed to breaking point by Akshub's imprecations and insults. He felt dull inside, the words tumbling from his lips without conscious thought.

'Yes! Yes!' the priestess screeched. 'The way, it is open! Now go. Go. Shield your mind. Remember all I have told you.'

He lifted his eyes and stepped through without hesitation.

What did he feel? Tumbling. *Things* plucking at him. Great, unwavering power. To see into the warp with one's mind was one thing, but to be physically *in* it…

He could never have put it into words. Few could, for to enter that realm was death to any soul. And yet…

He felt where he should exit with senses that he did not know he possessed. He tumbled to the ground only a couple of metres short of the pile of mouldering heads.

Akshub sat down beside him as he lay, heaving. She looked him up and down, then stretched out her hand and closed her eyes. She spoke a spell of divination under her breath. Her mind probed at his, before her inhuman eyes snapped open again.

'It is you. Nothing rides your body.'

Erebus pulled himself from the floor, exhausted.

'Now rest,' Akshub said, with the slightest hint of pride in her voice. 'Tomorrow you shall do it again.'

His trips grew longer. First outside the ruins, then onto the plains, then later into the settlements further away. Erebus stalked the dusty streets by night. He was not out of place in the largest settlements, for the Word Bearers had a presence here, although when he caught sight of his legionary brothers he would duck quickly out of view. He struggled to maintain his composure; such was his sense of triumph that he would gladly shout it to the heavens.

He started to bring his own victims back to their lair. The place became foetid, buzzing with blowflies and rank with the stench of old blood. For the shorter trips, however, he no longer needed to kill.

He plotted longer and longer journeys – at first only in short steps, until he could circle the whole planet in a single night.

Akshub's short-lived pride in her teaching grew into wariness as his competency increased. She kept her distance, and became almost entirely passive. She barely spoke to him, spending long

periods seemingly in a trance, but did nothing to disrupt his learning.

Then he dared the moon. He stood in its daylit swamps, gazing up in amazement at Davin's night side where he had been only seconds before.

No matter how far he went, the time he felt within the warp varied little. The same sensations of power and fear. The struggle to keep his mind blank of all but his destination. The tumble from one realm to the other. He lacked Akshub's elegance, but he knew that he could go farther than she. He had grown more powerful than her, and they both knew it.

She ceased to guide him at all. She stopped eating. Erebus guessed that she was preparing herself for the end. He was angered by that, but still she did not leave the temple.

He set himself one final test.

He emerged into his quarters aboard the *Destiny's Hand* with a clatter, spat from the warp with force. He slammed into his iron lectern, scattering books, manuscripts and data-slates onto the floor.

Laughing, he fell back into them. Surrounded by a jumble of arcane knowledge, he laughed long and loud.

He had pinpointed a ship, moving through the warp at speed, without any beacon or homing signal. He had arrived within his locked and barred sanctum, and no one had detected him in any way.

'I truly am the Hand of Destiny,' he murmured to himself.

He left again before he was discovered, back to the ruined temple on the other side of Ultima Segmentum.

Now it was time for that old witch to die.

'So sure have you become, Lord Kor Phaeron, that you think yourself worthy of the very secrets of the gods themselves?' said Erebus.

'I am *foremost* among the servants of the gods!' insisted Kor Phaeron. 'I followed them of old. I demand to know their purpose. They do not deny me, Apostle, and yet you do. You promised to reveal the purpose of these athames. Do so. I command it.'

Erebus scowled. The old man disappointed him.

'So be it, my lord. Like the warp-flasks, they are gifts of the gods. They possess the power to shield the wielder from harm, or to aid him in the working of great sorceries. Know, however, that these things are dependent on the ability of he who carries them.'

'That is worse than cryptic, my lord,' offered Undil with a knowing grin.

Foedral Fell laughed.

Erebus shrugged. 'I speak words of truth to the deaf, then. These athames are not merely ritual tokens, but tools of enlightenment. A wound from them can turn the mightiest hero to our cause, opening his eyes to the majesty of Chaos, and the perfidy of the Emperor.'

'I sense no such power beyond the gift of death,' muttered Quor Vondar, holding his blade close to his closed eyes. 'Though there is an echo of *something*…' A frown creased his brow, as though he were straining to listen.

'As I said, Master Vondar,' said Erebus coldly, 'it would depend upon the abilities of those that carry them. One might use it for whatever purpose they set their mind to.'

Kor Phaeron seemed to regard his blade in a new light. 'You say that they are tools of enlightenment?' he said, his eyes gleaming. 'Enlightenment, or corruption?'

'Of *conversion*, my lord. Amongst other things.'

'And doubtless you will not tell us what those things are?' said Cxir.

'The gods will not spoon-feed you power, my lords, and nor will I. It must be learned and seized.

Learn as I have, or fall by the wayside in the months and years to come. The choice is yours – I have simply given you a focus for your future endeavours, in the hope that you might…' His words trailed away, and he cast his eyes downwards. 'Well, there you have it. I see a touch of greatness in each of you.'

'Of course,' said Fell. 'But why? Tell us, or we will not take your blades, no matter what wonders you promise. You surely do not expect us to follow your whispers so blindly?'

'No, of course not.'

'Then for what reason do you hand us these athames?'

Erebus smiled widely. He restrained himself for a moment, savouring the pent-up irritation of the others.

Rabor slammed his blade down flatly upon the table, and stood.

'*Destiny*,' Erebus said eventually, and a delicious shiver passed up his spine at the sound of it.

Kor Phaeron, Dark Cardinal of the Word Bearers

Akshub was waiting for him when he returned. She watched him as he approached.

'I have learned all I can from you, priestess,' Erebus said, casting off his rough robe.

'That is so.'

‘Only one more task remains to me, here.’

‘I have foreseen it,’ she agreed.

She did not resist as he knelt and pinned her to the floor in the centre of the temple with seven of the athames, their unnatural blades sinking into the stone as hot knives might sink into ice. She cried out as he repeated the ritual that he had seen her perform upon the Davinite priest the day she had sent Erebus to meet the Warmaster.

She did not plead with him, not even as he peeled back her withered skin, though she gasped as he sank the last of the blades into the exposed muscles of her chest.

She was still conscious as he cut out her heart and bit into it. Her eyes fluttered as her blood ran down his chin. ‘*It is…*’ she hissed, ‘*the will… of the gods…*’

Curiously, she died with a smile upon her face.

As Erebus chewed and swallowed, his transhuman physiology took over. The memories and thoughts of the priestess came to him in fits and flashes. Her wisdom was his, and he revelled in–

His chewing slowed. There was a recent recollection there that he had not expected.

A shadowed face. A furtive meeting.

He swallowed again, and took another bite, his teeth worrying at the tough muscle.

No matter how hard he focused, he could not bring that face into the light. Whoever the stranger was, though, they had told Akshub something that had gladdened her greatly.

Erebus knew then that he had been cheated of his revenge. She had waited for him to slay her. As much as she had wanted to live, Akshub had died in service of the gods, perhaps party to something greater that he would now never know.

He cast the remains of the heart aside with a cry of frustration. He rocked back on his heels next to the ruin of the priestess’s body.

Patience.

He had learned what he needed to learn, but he was not content. Akshub had won.

The knife in his hand began to hum a harsh, troubling note at the edge of his perception. One by one, the others picked up their own discordant tone. It was a terrible, raucous sound, until the eighth knife sang out, and the cacophony became a thing of riotous beauty. Just as the primarch had written, Erebus heard for the first time the eightfold song of Chaos, and the future opened up to him.

Then the notes slowly died.

Erebus plucked the blades from the priestess’s body. The final act of consecration was complete, and his shards were ready.

They tingled in his grasp as he gathered them. With an easy flourish he drew one – the one he had selected as his own – across the skin of reality, and stepped back to the *Destiny’s Hand*.

Erebus left the chamber first, followed closely by Sergeant Undil. Kor Phaeron had an evil look about him, and the Dark Apostle did not have the patience for any more of his posturing.

Many of the others were angry at his obtuseness. What did he care? They were also more than a little afraid of him now, and that gave him a hold over all. His goals were close to fulfilment. The shards would be present as he needed them to be, and the blood they would shed could only hasten the future that he had foreseen, even if nothing else.

If Lorgar did intend to rid himself of Erebus, then he would be disappointed. That the eight Shards of Erebus now also offered his fellow commanders the opportunity of escape from Calth was unimportant to him. Whether or not they would learn how to effect flight through the immaterium should they need it, well…

That was something he would leave to the will of the gods.

+++DATA-INLOAD SUSPENDED. PURGE ROUTINE INITIATED+++
+++FATAL ERROR: CANNOT FIND VARIABLE “ushkul thu”**+++**
+++ERROR+++
+++ERROR+++
+++ERROR+++
+++ERROR+++
+++ERROR+++
+++ERROR+++
+++ERROR+++
+++ERROR+++
+++ERR–we are the dawn of sanctity. what lives in the eighth shall not die. those that cast down shall sit upon thrones. what changes is eternal. that which writhes in the grave’s womb will be reborn. they who live without shackles shall be freed. we are the footsteps of the new sun. we are the pyre’s children**–OR+++**
+++ERROR+++
+++ERROR+++
+++ERROR+++
++WE RISE++
+IT BEGINS+

CALTH THAT WAS

Graham McNeill

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The XIII Legion 'Ultramarines'

Remus Ventanus, Captain, Fourth Company
Kiuz Selaton, Sergeant, Fourth Company
Lyros Sydance, Captain, Fourth Company
Ankrion, Sergeant, Fourth Company
Barkha, Sergeant, Fourth Company
Eikos Lamiad, 'Eikos of the Arm', Tetrarch of Ultramar (Konor)
Telemechrus, The Sky Warrior', Contemptor Dreadnought
Aethon, Captain, 19th Company
Octavian Bruscius, Captain, 24th Company
Colbya, Techmarine
Urath, Sergeant, 39th Company

The XVII Legion 'Word Bearers'

Foedral Fell, Anointed commander
Hol Beloth, Anointed commander
Maloq Kartho, Dark Apostle
Eriesh Kigal, Terminator Sergeant
Zu Gunara, Dreadnought

Imperial Personae

Meer Edv Tawren, Server of Instrumentation, Mechanicum
Subiaco, Ingenium, Calth Pioneer Auxilia
Riuk Hamadri, Colonel, Defence Auxilia
Volper Ullyet, Captain, 77th Ingenium Support Division
Kadene, Major, Cardace Storm Troopers
Bartebes, Corporal, Cardace Storm Troopers

I

Who will be the last to die?

Honorius Luciel's name is entered in the Operational Records as the first, but who will be the last? The treachery orchestrated by the Warmaster began with the death of an Ultramarine, but Captain Remus Ventanus of the Fourth Company has sworn that it will end with the death of a Word Bearer. Not one of their rag-cloaked rabble of cultist-brotherhoods, not one of the skinless abominations dragged from the empyrean, but with a warrior of the XVII Legion.

Ventanus has marked a strip of oath paper with his angular handwriting to that effect. Sydance and Barkha bore witness to this, and Selaton affixed the wax-sealed strip to the hilt of his gladius. Ventanus will be the one to drag the last of Lorgar's sons to the surface of Calth and tear his armour from him before throwing the bastard to the irradiated ground.

He will wait and watch as the caustic rays from the poisoned sun burn the flesh from the Word Bearer's bones. As layer after layer of skin blackens and drifts away like cinders, the toxic air will scald the traitor's throat, silencing his screams and causing him to retch up the frothing, disintegrating remains of his lungs.

And just at the instant before the sun's deadly rays finally kill him, Ventanus will put a bolt through the Word Bearer's skull.

The last to die will be a Word Bearer, slain by the hand of an Ultramarine.

This is not theoretical.

Purely practical.

II

Lanshear.

Once counted among the great starports of Calth, the city-sized facility burned in the fires of a Legion's wrath. Hol Beloth and Foedral Fell were two names they knew, but there were others – warriors whose deeds might once have echoed with honour in an earlier age, but which were now bywords for betrayal, mentioned in the same breath as Horus.

Lanshear is a necropolis, a cemetery city whose streets are choked with scorched hulks of wrecked fighting machines, the planet-wide detritus of battle and tens of thousands of radiation-blackened bodies. The lethal rays of Calth's sun are burning their bones to ash and irradiated winds blow flakes from the dead in swirling dust devils. Most are the mortal soldiery of the traitors, killed by the retribution of the orbital platforms or poisoned by the sun when the last of the planet's atmosphere was stripped away. Only a scattered few corpses have the post-human scale of legionaries.

Only enemy dead remain on the surface.

The fallen of Calth have been taken below and accorded the proper honour.

Great siege excavators and Mechanicum construction engines intended for wars of crusade are digging mortuary caverns throughout Calth's bedrock; vast galleries and deep shafts where the honoured dead will forever be part of the world they died defending.

Ingenium Subiaco's Pioneers have much yet to accomplish, but honouring the dead was the first task Ventanus set them.

III

Tawren's purging of enemy scrapcode from the orbital defence grid saved Lanshear from complete destruction, but the thoroughness of her retribution left little standing after the beam weapons, missile stations and barrage platforms pounded the Word Bearers' assault to dust. The shells of foundries and roofless manufactories spread over the blasted industrial hinterland like the ruins of some long-dead civilisation. Forests of sagging tower cranes and the buckled remains of bulk lifter-rigs list like drunks, and the railhead terminal of the Bedrus Oblique is like a child's toy-set of rolling stock scattered across the transit lines and engine hangars.

Munitions depots and cargo containers stockpiled in anticipation of being raised to orbit burn throughout the starport, and hundreds of ink-black columns of smoke striate the rippling aurora of the sky. The crackle of flames and the screech-metal sound of collapsing structures echo mournfully through gutted transport hulks and the wreckage of a world-conquering army.

Ventanus remembers this place.

He remembers the sheer violence, the never-ending blitz of enemy fire, the overwhelming force of it all. Mass-reactives in solid hurricanes, las sheeting like neon rain and the thunder of traitor battle engines howling in bloody triumph. Explosions and screams merging to shape the death-cry of an entire world.

Compared to that, this nightmarish, flame-lit vision of perdition is almost quiet.

Lanshear is dead, but there is yet activity. The distant foundries and cargo depots far to the north of the main fields are wreathed in a mist that is wholly unnatural, and fires burn there that are not the fires of devastation, but of construction and rebuilding. In the midst of this planetary cataclysm, something survives. Fragmentary vox-intercepts suggest Foedral Fell holds the northern foundries, but beyond that supposition, nothing more is known for certain.

The aftermath of the battle for Calth has left a great deal of *theoretical*, but precious little *practical*.

Below the ridge where Ventanus and two hundred legionaries of the Fourth are concealed, the rusted tracks leading from the burning railhead terminal run in arrow-straight lines from the Oblique to the foundry depots.

'Can you see anything, sir?' asks Selaton, crawling up to join him at the edge of the ridge.

Ventanus shakes his head. Whatever is happening in the north remains a mystery.

'I need Vattian's scouts,' he says. 'But...'

He waves a hand, leaving the sentence hanging, and Selaton nods in understanding.

During their desperate thrust towards the guildhall, Vattian's pathfinders safely brought them into Lanshear under the watchful gaze of the Word Bearers, but their armour is too light to survive the hostile environment of the surface. Even Mark IV plate can only remain above ground for a limited time before its protective qualities are eroded. Terminators can move with impunity, but Ventanus has precious few of them at his disposal.

'You really think the Word Bearers will come this way?' asks Selaton, and Ventanus knows that the sergeant shares Sydance's belief that this is a theoretical without merit.

'I do,' says Ventanus, nodding towards the railhead terminal. Hundreds of locomotive convoys lie

scattered like dead snakes throughout, their fuel tenders split and belching thick, tarry smoke.

'Why?' asks Selaton. 'There are plenty more direct routes to the northern foundries.'

'All of which involve crossing large tracts of open ground.'

'Hit it at speed and they could be across before the orbitals got a solution.'

'Without vehicles? Would *you* risk it?'

Selaton considers the question for a moment before answering. 'Theoretical – if I was trapped on an enemy world with no immediate prospect of reinforcements, I'd want to link up with friendly forces as quickly as possible.'

'Practical – the railhead terminal offers cover,' says Ventanus, gesturing to the building's shell-cratered roof. The covering is still largely intact, though shafts of wounded blue light spear through its smoke-fogged interior. 'Server Tawren's auspex feeds suggest that whoever's leading this force is cautious. He's moving from cover to cover, taking his time.'

'But she lost them,' points out Selaton. 'We don't know where they are now.'

'If he wants to reach Foedral Fell alive, he'll come this way,' asserts Ventanus.

'Did the Server happen to mention anything about their numbers?'

'At least five hundred, maybe more,' replies Ventanus.

'Then I hope you're right,' says Selaton with relish.

IV

They come in ragged squads at first. Tentatively, like thieves in the darkness.

Emerging from the gutted shell of a Titan repair facility, two groups of Word Bearers emerge like wary grazing beasts approaching a watering hole frequented by an apex predator. They move swiftly between the burning hulks of derailed shipping containers. Ventanus lets a finger slip beneath the trigger guard of his bolter.

He lets out a breath.

These are just scouting forces – probing thrusts into the flaming ruins at the edge of the terminus. They hope to provoke any potential ambushers into carelessness, but Ventanus has been specific in his orders. None of his warriors open fire, though each of them dearly wishes to. If this trap is to be sprung completely, then the Word Bearers must fully stick their heads into the noose.

Watching the enemy warriors, Ventanus sees the plate of their legionary armour has changed again. First it changed from granite grey to crimson. Now it is a mixture of scorched black, bare-metal iron and a few remaining patches of bruised blood. The first was a choice, but this latest change is not. The light of Calth's wounded star has robbed the XVII Legion of uniformity, and Ventanus realises he can no longer think of them as legionaries.

They are too ragged, too *individual* to be worthy of such a unifying term.

They do not even deserve any force designation such as company or battalion.

This is a *warband*, a haphazard arrangement of survivors.

Within the protective environment of his helmet, his lip curls in contempt.

You won't be survivors for much longer.

These forward elements of the Word Bearers advance into the railhead terminal, still moving cautiously, still keeping one eye on the sky and the unseen orbital weapons. They pass out of sight, obscured by the banks of smoke, and Ventanus counts the long seconds in time with his heartbeat.

He wonders if he has made a mistake. Perhaps the Word Bearers have split into smaller groups,

each one making its own way to Foedral Fell. He senses Selaton's scrutiny, but keeps his gaze fastened on the buckled tracks leading to the terminus. He wills the enemy to show itself.

Then the real prize comes into view.

A marching column of Word Bearers emerges from the shelter of the repair facility, moving with as much speed as caution allows. Ventanus calculates their numbers to be close to six hundred. All infantry – no vehicle support and no Dreadnoughts. A few light artillery pieces, but nothing that gives him pause or second thoughts.

But it is more than their lack of heavy firepower that convinces him that this attack will work. Watching the exaggerated caution in their movements, Ventanus realises that the Word Bearers are in a state of shock. They came to Calth arrogant, confident of total victory. They forgot *who* they were fighting. That slip allowed the Ultramarines to deliver a stinging reprimand, the gut-punch from a downed fighter that turns the bout on its head.

Ventanus waits until he is sure that there are no more Word Bearers yet to emerge from hiding.

He rises to his feet and reaches behind him, hand outstretched.

Another sergeant, Barkha, hands Ventanus the standard, its haft dented and the fabric of the company colours torn and ragged. He plants it at the edge of the ridge and pulls his bolter tight to his shoulder.

'For Calth!' he shouts, and two hundred warriors of the Fourth rise up.

Bolter fire blitzes down into the wreckage in front of the railhead terminus. The barking volley punches scores of Word Bearers from their feet before they are even aware that they are under attack. A second volley kills dozens more. Now the enemy are moving into cover, returning fire and keeping their heads down. The Ultramarines do not advance, but hold their position, pouring fire into the enemy ranks. Ventanus is a keen-eyed shot and takes his time, picking his targets with care. He scans for officers and sergeants among the Word Bearers. His task is made more difficult by the fact that the scorching of their war-plate has obliterated most symbols of rank.

In lieu of conventional markings, he targets those with the greatest disfigurements wrought upon their shoulder guards or helmets, the most heavily scarred or those to whom others appear to defer. He puts a mass-reactive through the helm of a warrior whose breastplate is hung with dagger-like fetishes and whose mail cloak glitters with an oily sheen. He kills another with a jagged star symbol cut into the faceplate of his helm. A warrior with a long chain-glaive and a crackling power claw dies with his chest blown out as he runs between two broken tenders. Any one of these kills would earn him a commendation for marksmanship, had anyone but him seen the shots.

Ventanus feels the same *rightness* to these kills he felt as they first fought their way into Lanshear. At this moment, his bolter is more than just a weapon, it is an instrument of just retribution, the nemesis of all that is faithless and treacherous. He ejects his emptied magazine and slots a fresh one home with smooth ease.

A series of explosions bloom along the ridge-line, and the impacts hurl perhaps twenty Ultramarines to the ground. Ventanus recognises the detonations of lightweight field artillery shells. Scavenged Army weapons, not Legion ordnance. All the downed Ultramarines are quickly back on their feet and firing downhill with only a fractional pause in their killing.

The Word Bearers are shooting back, but their response is desultory at best. Some enemy warriors are not even bothering to return fire, and it takes Ventanus a moment to realise why. Selaton reaches the same conclusion a moment later.

'They don't have enough ammunition to fight back,' he says.

That same realisation is spreading amongst his warriors, and Ventanus feels their desire to take the

fight to the Word Bearers. They want to look the traitors in the eye as they kill them. They want to spill enemy blood with their own two hands. Like them, Ventanus wants to mag-lock his bolter and advance with his sword drawn, to teach Lorgar's faithless sons the cost of not finishing the job they started.

He checks the thought.

The theoretical is glorious, but this practical does not allow for emotion.

'Hold position,' he says. 'Maintain fire.'

The tone of his voice is unequivocal and locks the Ultramarines in place.

The Word Bearers are no longer shooting back. Instead, they are risking the relentless fire of the Ultramarines as they run for the rail terminus. They have abandoned the field guns, knowing they are useless against warriors protected by power armour.

Dozens of Word Bearers are cut down as they cross the open ground, but hundreds more survive to reach the smoke-choked cover of the terminal. Thick smoke swallows them and not even Ventanus's auto-senses can penetrate the chem-rich blackness.

Selaton looks at him, waiting for him to give the order.

Word Bearers bodies litter the ground.

Some will still be alive, and Ventanus is glad. They will know what is coming.

He opens a vox-link on a pre-arranged frequency.

'Server Tawren, this is Ventanus. The enemy is in the kill-box,' he says. 'You have a solution?'

'Affirmative,' comes Tawren's vox-distorted reply. 'Engaging now.'

Her voice is without accent and apparently devoid of emotion – though Ventanus knows her well enough to know that is not true. He has come to like her, as much as any post-human can be said to *like* a chimeric, fully modified adept of the Martian priesthood.

Selaton hears this exchange and turns his gaze upon the railhead terminus as the clouds light up with the approaching storm. A dazzling tower of light flashes from space, briefly linking an orbital lance battery with the surface of Calth. The shell-punctured roof of the terminal lifts off in a rush of explosive kinetic force before vanishing in a cloud of fire.

Ventanus does not flinch as the electromagnetic pulse and colossal overpressure wash over him. With one hand on the company standard, he stands immobile as another lance strike pounds the railhead terminus, then another. Twice more the orbital battery unleashes its power, and when the roiling banks of volcanic smoke are blown clear, nothing remains.

The ground has been vitrified. Not so much as a single brick or nub of steelwork remains standing within a five-hundred-metre radius of the first impact point.

Ventanus nods in satisfaction and returns the standard to Sergeant Barkha.

He pre-empts Selaton's question of the lance strike's timing before it is asked.

'Because I want the last sight of every Word Bearer to be an Ultramarine,' says Ventanus.

V

The caves sit beneath a conurb-ring on the southern transit hub of the Uranik Radial, a once populous region of vast habitation blocks a hundred kilometres west of Lanshear. Its hyperstructures and sprawling mega-towers were toppled by the guns of warring Titans, in a firestorm like the coming of an apocalypse. Heedless of the terrified inhabitants, traitor engines and loyalist forces duelled in a battle that left hundreds of thousands of combatants dead, but saw no real victor as each side's forces

were drawn away to higher-value objectives.

The caves are a marvel, a series of naturally occurring subterranean voids that local legends attribute to the mythical serpent said to have honeycombed the bedrock of Calth in the planet's prehistory. No one believes such things, not even children, but a new serpent has made its lair in the coiling tunnels beneath the Uranik Radial.

His name is Hol Beloth, and once he commanded an army of annihilation, a genocidal host that sought not to conquer and enslave but to destroy in the name of Horus. Half a million warriors rallied to his banner.

The barest fraction of that force remains.

His army has been reduced to less than ten thousand, and even this number is largely made up of the mangy rabble of the brotherhoods: among them the Kaul Mandori, the Tzenvar Kaul, the Jeharwanate, and the Ushmetar Kaul. Bloodied and humbled, the predatory hosts of Hol Beloth take refuge in the Uranik arcology, invisible to the murderous fire of the orbital batteries and sheltered from the deadly radiation scouring the surface, but tarred with failure.

As falls from grace go, Hol Beloth's is all but complete.

Hol Beloth is one of the anointed ones, a warlord of vaunted ambition and proven battle-worth. He has led conquests on a thousand worlds, seen the fall of empires and brought ruin to uncounted enemies. He is all this and more, but he fears that his dream of ascending to stand at the side of Lord Aurelian is slipping from his grasp.

He still does not understand how they failed.

The Ultramarines were broken, scattered and leaderless. Within minutes of destruction.

And then the heavens rained fire and killing light, gutting Titans with every hammerblow from orbit and reducing entire warhosts to ash. Somehow, the enemy had regained control of the orbital batteries and turned what should have been his greatest triumph into his blackest defeat. Lanshear was to burn in the thunder of Hol Beloth's guns, but the storm turned and tore the beating heart from his chest.

He broods in a cave that echoes with the heartbeat of the dying world, with nothing but ashes for companionship. At his full height, Hol Beloth is a towering giant in crimson armour, his flesh cut with the words of Lorgar and inked in consecrated blood, but defeat has bowed him. He was chosen for great things, but failed to live up to his end of that bargain, and the forces that empowered him have forsaken his ambitions.

For all Hol Beloth knows, his army may be the last alive on Calth.

His fellow commanders. Do any of them yet live?

Is Kor Phaeron dead or does he still fight to bring the Word to Calth?

Hol Beloth has no answers and the sense of loss is paralysing him.

The warp-flask sits beside him, the oil-dark liquid stagnant and lifeless, where once it wriggled and slithered with the motion of something foetal and immeasurably ancient. He speaks to it, hoping to hear from his fellow commanders, but receives no reply. The *thing* that deigned to squeeze a fragment of its consciousness into that many-angled space is gone, and Hol Beloth has never felt more isolated. The Ultramarines control the few remaining satellites, and rad-storms on the surface make a mockery of any attempt at encrypted vox.

He looks up as he hears approaching footsteps, legionary footsteps. His mouth curls in a sneer as he sees Maloq Kartho. The Dark Apostle filled his head with visions of power and majesty throughout the approach to Calth and their campaign of extermination. Like all true zealots, he refuses to let their utter defeat diminish his passion. Hol Beloth wants to kill him, but when the nights come to Calth the muttering shadows still attend the Apostle like unseen flunkies.

And in the caverns beneath Calth, it is *always* night.

'What do you want?' demands Hol Beloth.

'To take the Word to the Ultramarines,' says Kartho. 'As you should.'

'You want to fight?' snaps Hol Beloth. 'Go ahead. Make your way to the surface and see how long it takes the orbital guns to end you.'

Kartho is a bleak presence – similarly marked, but thrice favoured. He has the blessing of the primarch, the empyrean and the beasts from beyond the veil. His armour glistens, as though freshly daubed with blood, and the runic inscriptions carved into every plate writhe in the azure bioluminescence of the cave. His helm bears a single horn at his right temple that curls around his head to an iron-sheathed point at his left cheek. At his back is a long staff, black-hafted and trailing smoky shadows that etch themselves upon the air.

His face is angular, swathed in darkness and hard to read.

Hol Beloth suspects this to be deliberate artifice on Kartho's part.

'You think your work on Calth is done, Beloth?' says the Dark Apostle. 'Do you really believe your task was simply to fight a *mortal* war? The Warmaster and Lorgar Aurelian require you to do more than spill blood with bolt and blade. They require you to transform the canvas of the galaxy, to bring great truths to those who have been blinded by the Emperor's empty promises. You are an avatar of the new age.'

Anger touches Hol Beloth and he rises from his torpor with one hand hovering near the hilt of his war-blade, the other curled in a fist.

'You spoke those words before,' he says. 'When I marched at the head of an unstoppable army. They put fire into the hearts of all who heard them, but I understand their truth now. They are as hollow as a Colchisian promise and just as meaningless.'

Maloq Kartho unhooks the spiked staff from his back, and Hol Beloth thinks for a moment he means to attack him. Instead, Kartho plants it into the ground and the muttering shadows swell at his back. The staff's length is scrimshawed with catechisms and blessings copied from Lorgar's great book and topped with a circular finial, the eight spines of the Octed radiating from its centre.

'You are weak, Hol Beloth,' says the Dark Apostle. 'Weak and stupid. A petulant child who weeps and wails and gnashes his teeth the first instant his desires are thwarted.'

Hol Beloth reaches for his sword, but before the blade is even half drawn, the dark smoke around Kartho's staff whips out to slap his hand from the hilt. Kartho is in front of him an instant later, moving without seeming to move, as though the muttering shadows have borne him aloft.

Hol Beloth takes a backward step, surrounded by a veil of darkness that ripples with undulant motion, like a slick of oil in the air. Shapes move within its depths, infinitesimal fragments of immense presences from beyond space and time, pressing at the meniscus that separates this reality from theirs. They have no form, save that which he imprints upon them; a multitude of eyes, fanged mouths and curving horns that manifest and fade as soon as he looks.

They are hungry. They feel the beat of his heart and crave the taste of his lifeblood.

He is powerless to stop them if they attack.

Kartho steps in close, and the darkness parts before him. It wraps itself around him like a shroud, slithering over the curved surfaces of his war-plate, its lightless form lingering at his back like an acolyte.

The sight disgusts Hol Beloth.

'To think I anointed you and set your feet upon the path to glory,' says the Dark Apostle with a disappointed shake of his head. 'Lorgar brought us truth from the place where gods and mortals meet,

but you do not see it. You are too *ignorant* to see it. You have a chance to leave your mortal shell behind and rise to glory, but your moment is passing with every second you spend in wretched self-pity.'

Hol Beloth does not fully understand Kartho's words, but he feels the terror of everything he was promised slipping beyond his reach, never to come again. He drops to one knee before the Dark Apostle, head bowed as a supplicant.

'Tell me what I must do,' he says.

The notion of submitting to the Dark Apostle's designs is abhorrent to him, but now he knows he will say or do anything to hold on to his ambitions. So badly does he desire to stand at the side of Lorgar and Horus that he willingly begs for Kartho's scraps.

'The galaxy is changing, Hol Beloth,' says the Dark Apostle. 'The old ways are passing, and a new order is establishing itself. What *was* is no more, and what *will be* is just taking shape. Those who embrace that truth will prosper. Those who do not will perish.'

'Tell me what I must do,' he asks again. 'What do the powers require of me?'

Kartho leans down and his hooded eyes are alight with a passion only bloodshed ignites.

'Atrocity,' says Kartho. 'They require atrocity.'

VI

Geologists once came from far distant corners of the Imperium to study the cavern arcologies of Calth. Magi from the forges of Mars and the master masons of the Terran Guilds marvelled at their self-sufficiency and remarked often on how seamlessly the artifice of man blended with the vagaries of natural formation.

Horus himself once came to Calth as Guilliman's honoured guest, though no one now remarks on that particular visit. Ingenium Subiaco pauses in his labours and wonders what those magi and masons would make of what has been done beneath Calth's surface now.

A tall man with a permanent stoop that comes from spending endless days bending over highly detailed schemata, the ingenium's craggy face is crowned with a thinning crop of corn-coloured hair. A set of brass-rimmed goggles, complete with noospheric MIU and a full sensorium suite, is clamped to Subiaco's haunted face like some form of surgical device. In the fine tradition of the Ingenium from Calth, he cultivates a long moustache with its ends waxed to points that curl over his florid cheeks.

Long days and restless nights have given him an unkempt look, one at odds with his station as a senior ingenium of the Calth Pioneer Auxilia. A wave of tiredness washes through him and his eyes flutter closed for an instant, but he quickly blinks them open. He has too many nightmares in his sleep to wish for more in his waking hours.

Subiaco stifles a yawn and watches as yet another opening in the bedrock is gradually sealed up. This one is a dead tunnel that delves a thousand metres from a lower branch cavern of Arcology X. The cartographae drones that returned tell him the tunnel is a dead end, but the violence of the war has made accurate readings of the deep caverns next to impossible.

A pulse of thought fades up a noospheric projection of the tunnel's dimensions before his eyes. Subiaco dials down the magnification to view its entirety. The tunnel is five metres wide and curves downwards in a gentle arc for another three hundred metres, twisting through a series of sharp bends before arriving at a water-filled corrasional cave. The deeper reaches of the tunnel are hazed with error-signifiers. Subiaco wishes he had the time and manpower to map them with greater accuracy.

The cavern in which he stands is filled with the tools of the ingenium: blue and grey earth-moving machines, each with dozer blades tens of metres high, bulk crawlers with pneumatic arms capable of lifting a super-heavy battle engine with ease, drilling rigs with conical snouts, and a lone construction engine of the Mechanicum. The noise they make is cacophonous, and but for the aural baffles worked into the mechanism of his goggles, he would long since have been deafened.

Hundreds of men and women of the Pioneer Auxilia are manoeuvring the last of the blast shutters into metres-deep caissons at the mouth of the tunnel, while lumbering tankers of permacrete stand ready. The Pioneers wear heavy, tear-resistant coveralls and bulky respirators, but toil without complaint in the heat, dust and gloom.

They are bent to their labours with pride and determination.

Subiaco understands that pride, it is Ultramarian to the core.

To strive for excellence is the bare minimum expected of Lord Guilliman's people, and to be born in the Five Hundred Worlds is an honour and privilege that must be repaid every day.

The world above is no more, but he and his Pioneers will be builders of the world below.

Subiaco watches the work with bloodshot eyes, but he needs offer no suggestions nor make any corrections. His subordinates know their craft and his instructions are precise, needing no further explanation. Instead, he calls up a fuller rendition of Arcology X, smiling as he realises that Captain Ventanus's hurried marking of a map has effectively renamed this cave complex forever.

Thinking of Ventanus, Subiaco looks up as an Ultramarines sergeant in a battle-damaged suit of power armour approaches him. He does not know this warrior, but the deep blue of his armour is heavily abraded across the breastplate and pauldrons with bullet impacts and blade scars.

Only his helmet is unscathed, painted a fresh crimson that seems oddly fitting.

'Sergeant Ankrion,' says Subiaco, optical filters reading the warrior's name beneath a patina of las-burns on his right shoulder guard. 'Is there something I can do for you today?'

'How long until the tunnel is sealed?' asks the giant.

Ankrion's tone is brusque, but Subiaco understands his urgency. Subiaco calls up a host of data-streams and sifts graphs of work completion sigils with haptic implants in his fingertips.

'The shutters will be in place momentarily. Once the integrity checks are complete, we spray the permacrete and I will implant the locking seal. All things being equal, the tunnel will be secure within the hour.'

Ankrion nods, though he is clearly unhappy with the answer.

'You can't do it quicker?' he asks.

'Not if you want an Ingenium Mark on the work, no.'

'Would more machines speed the process?'

'Of course, but we don't have any more machines,' says Subiaco. 'We're lucky to have the ones we've got.'

'Clarify.'

Subiaco waves a hand at the construction engines and earth-moving machinery, causing his holographic graphs to spin away.

'None of these machines should be here, Sergeant Ankrion. They were all due for orbital transit when the traitors attacked.'

'So why *are* they here?'

'My understanding is that we have the Word Bearers to thank for that.'

'I'm not in the habit of thanking those bastards for anything,' says Ankrion, and Subiaco hurries to explain himself as the Space Marine exudes a looming threat.

‘You misunderstand. The corruption they used to infect the orbital defence systems,’ says Subiaco. ‘It appears it caused a cumulative arithmetical overflow in the scheduling subroutines of a Defence Auxilia calculus-logi, which saw these engines sit idle on the embarkation platforms while the rest of Calth was being shipped into orbit. Lucky for us, eh?’

Ankrion does not reply, and looks up as the last of the blast shutters is lowered into position with a heavy impact of metal on stone. A squad of riveters move into position, their whining guns securing the shutter in place. Sparks rain down from their work, and the permacrete hoses lift with a hiss of pneumatics.

‘This would go quicker if we didn’t have to seal off all these dead branches,’ observes Subiaco, projecting a holographic representation of the tunnel’s structure from the surface of his data-slate. ‘For example, this tunnel terminates hundreds of kilometres from the nearest arcology or shelter. There’s really no need to expend resources to seal it.’

Ankrion takes a moment to study the gently rotating image.

‘Did you find a source for the water in the chamber at the tunnel’s end?’ he asks.

‘No, implying that it is an opening of negligible proportions.’

‘In other words, you don’t know where the water is coming from?’

‘Not as such, but–’

‘Captain Ventanus’s orders are unambiguous,’ interrupts Ankrion. ‘Any tunnel the termination of which cannot be confirmed absolutely is to be sealed.’

‘Sergeant, you need to understand that only a very few of Calth’s cave systems are linked. The vast majority spread through the planet’s crust in splendid isolation.’

‘If Calth is to survive, that’s going to have to change,’ says Ankrion.

VII

Shelter CV427/Praxor sits fifteen hundred kilometres to the east of Lanshear, a series of hardened bunkers and armaments storage facilities. It is designed to hold up to a hundred thousand fighting soldiers and a further twenty thousand ancillary staff, together with three battalions of Defence Auxilia personnel.

Its maximum occupancy is listed as one hundred and fifty thousand souls.

In the wake of the XVII Legion’s attack it is currently home to over twice that number. Its enlarged caverns and deep constructions are nightmares of overcrowding, yet there is little anger amongst its inhabitants, save that directed at the warriors of the Word Bearers who have driven them here.

This is to be expected.

The gates of Praxor have been closed for nearly two weeks, and tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the war and the doomed sun’s radioactive spasms have sought sanctuary within. The shelter’s accommodation is beyond its capacity, and the security of a weapons storage facility requires that every individual be identified. Once a full inventory has been taken of human and weaponised resources, a detailed campaign of resistance and reconquest can be developed.

Every entrance to the shelter, and there are many, has been sealed – some with permacrete shuttering and some with warriors bearing guns. Elements from five different companies of the Ultramarines are now based here: five hundred and sixty-seven legionaries. They do not guard the entrances to the arcology. They train, they re-arm, they mount sorties onto the surface when word comes from Arcology X that enemy forces are nearby.

The security of the gates falls to the Imperial Army – of which there are sixteen separate regiments present locally – and skitarii elements swept into the arcology by the star's radiation. Command protocols and communications are still in disarray as the Mechanicum adepts try to mesh Army vox-systems with their own and those of the Legiones Astartes. Different systems, hundreds of encrypted networks and trillions of code combinations have brought a special kind of hell to operational co-ordination.

It is this that is giving Major Kadene a headache that is only getting worse.

She and her squad of Cardace Storm Troopers occupy one of the smaller routes to the surface, more accurately described as a sinkhole filled with hardscrabble that has been pulled apart by millennia of tectonic movement. It is, nevertheless, a passageway that connects the caverns below with the surface and must be guarded.

Temporary shuttering sprayed with rad-proof sealant allows unprotected humans to occupy the prefab guard post and barricades that watch for infiltrators from the surface. Twenty soldiers occupy the position: battered, war-brutalised veterans who have seen their world torn apart and broken into pieces that can never be put back together. Major Kadene's men have fought the good fight, and only these twenty of her seven hundred remain. They fought at the Pasuchne Bridge, and held it long enough for the 86th Company of the Ultramarines to cross. Along the Marusine Highway, a ten-thousand-strong rabble of cultist scum chased them for a hundred kilometres before they reached the regimental strongpoint set up at the Talanko Arterial.

Hol Beloth's flanking forces, moving to encircle Lanshear, were on the verge of forcing them to abandon the strongpoint. But then came the fiery rain from orbit, burning the Word Bearers and their rabble to vapour ghosts.

Leaving her company colours flying proud at Talanko, Major Kadene followed Colonel Rurik as he brought the scraps of their regiment to Praxor.

Kadene knows she will never see the surface of Calth, but hopes that some remnants of the enemy forces will try to fight their way into the shelter. She dislikes being underground, having discovered a mild claustrophobia, but she is a Storm Trooper, and to acknowledge weakness is not in her nature. She sits in the guard post's single structure, a reinforced tin shack, with a vox-caster and her unit's stock of anti-radiation pills, ammo, food and water. This is what has become of her once elite unit

She flinches as a squawk of interference barks from the speaker horn of the vox-caster.

'Bloody Mechanicum,' says her adjutant, Corporal Bartebes. He smacks the grey-steel box with the heel of his palm. 'Bloody bastards never get anything bloody right.'

'I thought they were supposed to have this fixed by now.'

'And you bloody believed that, major?' says Bartebes, fishing a lho-stick from his pocket and lighting it with the ease of a professional. Oily smoke lifts from his mouth.

'I thought you quit,' says Kadene.

'I survived the surface,' replies Bartebes. 'If that ain't killed me, these bloody won't. It's boredom that'll do for me first.'

Kadene can't argue with his logic, and though she could order him to put it out, she won't. They have suffered too much in the last few weeks to deprive Bartebes of his vice. Besides, he's probably right.

She shrugs, turning on her heel as she hears the rumble of an engine. A big engine, something industrial. She wonders if there's something wrong with the sealant or the shuttering that requires a Pioneer work team. She doesn't feel any effects of surface radiation, but supposes that's probably why it's so dangerous.

‘Now what’s this bloody noise?’ wonders Bartebes as a heavy industrial carrier lumbers around the corner. Its cargo compartment is draped with a blue tarpaulin, roped down and covering several objects, bulky and oblong in shape. Work tools? Engineering equipment?

‘We expecting anyone?’ asks Kadene.

‘Not that they bloody told us,’ replies Bartebes, giving the vox another clout. ‘Not that we’d have heard on this piece of junk.’

The driver’s Army, but she can’t see his unit insignia. Thirty men accompany the carrier, some riding shotgun on the running boards, some marching alongside. They look bored, and Kadene can sympathise. There’s something... *ragged* about these soldiers, but that’s nothing unusual. Everyone looks a little ragged these days.

But her soldier’s instincts are telling her there’s more to it than that.

‘Find out what they want,’ says Kadene, lifting the vox-horn. ‘I’ll see if I can get some word from on high.’

Bartebes nods and reluctantly stubs out his lho-stick.

As he shoulders his hellgun, Kadene says, ‘Eyes on.’

Bartebes understands immediately and his demeanour instantly changes.

He leaves the guard post and waves four soldiers to accompany him, bulky in glossy plates of ablative carapace. Each Storm Trooper wears the regimental insignia of crossed lances over a skull on one shoulder plate, a hand-painted black X on the other. With Bartebes at their head, they march out in front of the new arrivals. Bartebes waves his arms in front of him like a crew chief on a landing platform.

‘Right, who the bloody hell are you?’ he demands with his customary wit and charm. ‘This is a Cardace post.’

A man in a uniform that hangs strangely on him detaches from the soldiers escorting the vehicle. He carries an old-style data-slate and holds it out to Bartebes. He says something she can’t hear. Kadene lifts the vox-horn and twists the dial to the assigned command frequency.

As she does so, her eyes alight on a man partially obscured by the tarpaulin-wrapped cupola of the cargo vehicle. He wears armour, but it takes her a fraction of a second to realise what’s wrong with it.

The man is dressed as a Cardace trooper, but she has never seen him before.

Her mouth opens to shout a warning.

A scream of dissonant noise erupts from the vox-horn, a blast of a million terrorised screams that comes from a place of horror and blood. It paralyses her. Literally paralyses her. Her every nerve is shrieking in pain, but she can’t move.

Something pours from the vox-horn, a rush of stinking black fluid. It spatters the wall like an oil-filled balloon has just been thrown at it. She sees the men talking to Bartebes pull out flasks of black liquid and throw them to the ground.

She can’t move. Fluid shapes leap from the black oil. She still can’t move.

More glass breaks. More viscous darkness erupts like tarry geysers.

Shifting, formless things of grasping arms, gaping mouths and tearing claws slam into her soldiers and bear them to the ground. The rest of the men in her command drag their rifles to their shoulders, but there are shadows for them all. They slither over the floors, stretch and swell over the walls and loom down from the cavern roof. Men are plucked from the ground and black filth pours into their screaming mouths. It stops up their ears and noses, presses its way into their skulls through their eyes, and invades the entirety of their bodies in the space of a heartbeat.

Kadene sees all of this, but she still can't move. Her entire body is shocked rigid by the squalling blast of nerve-paralysing sonics. The vox is laughing at her. The spatter of oil on the wall is pushing itself into a semblance of form. Human, but larger than any man she has ever seen. Bulked out beyond mortal norms, she recognises the fluid-formed outline of Legion plate. The helmeted head has a horn that curls around it, and is formed from glistening matter that stinks like a mass grave.

It turns its gaze on her and she wishes she could close her eyes. She wants nothing more than to shut this abhorrent monster away.

The door to the guard post is thrown open. The man Bartebes was talking to enters.

'They're all dead,' he tells the horned black torso extruded from the wall.

Behind him, Kadene sees her men being stripped of their armour and uniforms. The killers garb themselves in the colours of a regiment that, but for her, is now extinct. The dishonour is beyond insult. It is violation.

'You know where to take the device?' asks the monster, its voice a gurgling wet horror of liquid vowels and drowning consonants.

The man nods. 'The statue of Konor in Leprium. Rendezvous at zero-dark-thirty.'

Kadene wants so badly to reach down for her holstered laspistol. Sweat beads on her forehead. Her hand trembles and, incredibly, she feels a tingling sensation in her fingertips.

'Take three men and dump the corpses at least five kilometres out,' says the black apparition. 'The defenders must not learn what was taken until it is too late.'

'It won't be long before a relief force turns up.'

The black shape gurgles with what Kadene realises with sick horror is laughter. 'You wear loyalist uniforms. Welcome them and share the camaraderie of brothers. Then kill them.'

The black shape on the wall turns to her. A slit of a mouth forms in its impossible helm, a leering grin of anticipation. She feels warm leather at her fingers. The holster is open; she never keeps the press-stud closed. Sweat pours down her face, veins stand out. Her hand shakes as she slides it around the weapon's grip.

'Such gross betrayal of trust has power beyond measure,' says the horned monster.

Kadene draws and fires her pistol with a scream of pain and grief. All she has already suffered and all she has just lost is distilled into this last act of defiance.

She shoots the monster again and again. Her bolts burn it like a solder through plastek and ignite it like promethium. It burns away into a stinking mist. A sulphurous reek fills the guard post, the stench of voided bowels. She tries to turn her pistol on the mortal traitor, but the weapon is slapped from her hand. A rifle butt slams into the side of her face. Bone breaks and she falls to the ground. Pain shoots around her body and a gut-cramping nausea stabs through her paralysis.

The traitor drops on top of her, one knee in the chest, another over her throat. He has a black-bladed knife in one hand, the tip scratching the surface of her eyeball. Fluid oozes out over her cornea. His palm rests on the dagger's pommel, ready to drive it home.

'Just for that, I think you're gonna come with us,' he says. 'Be interesting to see what your new sun does to one of its own.'

VIII

The heavy adamantium gates of Arcology X rumble closed on rollers the size of Land Raiders, blotting out the venomous blue light of the system star. Booming locks hammer home, shutting the

subterranean complex off from the upper world. Thundering recyc-units purge the contaminated dust from the vast airlock chamber.

Remus Ventanus and the warriors of the Fourth Company stand immobile in the roaring winds as a Mechanicum adept and a host of servitors with hostile environment augmetics come forward with high pressure hoses, to scour them with electrolysed water that runs into specially dug sluices.

Ventanus has little patience for such processes, but with so many mortals packed into Arcology X, decontamination is a necessary evil of any mission to the surface.

Selaton and Barkha stand behind him, Barka still clutching the battered pole of the company standard that Ventanus retrieved from the slaughtered honour guard at the Numinus starport. Water drips from the eagle and the Ultima, making both shine brightly in the gloom of the gateway. The symbolism pleases Ventanus and makes the time taken to cleanse their armour feel worthwhile.

He could have the indentations of the dead warrior's grip worked out of the metal, but he will not. The dying grip of the Ultra-marine whose name he never knew will be a constant reminder of the Word Bearers' betrayal.

Wherever this standard ends its days, it will forever display the mark of its former bearer.

With the closing of the gate and the completion of decontamination procedures, the defence protocols ease a fraction and servitor-crewed turrets switch their macro-weapons from *armed* to *safe*. An internal bulkhead the size of a jungle escarpment rumbles down into the floor with the sound of tectonic plates grinding together. The Mechanicum adept waves the Ultramarines in and leads his servitors away.

Ventanus marches from the decontamination barbican into Arcology X.

IX

Captain Octavian Bruscius makes his way through the neatly arranged lines of beds and temporary shelters housing the groups of civilian survivors packed into CV427/Praxor. Bruscius is a gene-forged post-human, and they are but mortals, yet they are *all* warriors of Ultramar.

He feels proud to number himself among them.

He has fought in the Legion's battle lines for a century and a half, but fighting within the bounds of the Five Hundred Worlds is something he never expected.

There has never officially been a theoretical for a war between the Legions, and though Bruscius understands he is simply a line officer, even he recognises that the Ultramarines will never be the same again.

The Warmaster's treachery has upset the order of the galaxy, and *nothing* will ever be the same. He and his battle-brothers of the 24th Company are based in Praxor. Warriors from the 56th, 33rd, 111th and 29th Companies are here too. His group is the largest, boasting two hundred and nine warriors, whereas the 111th has been reduced to a single squad.

Cut off from the fighting, they are isolated beneath the tumbled ruins that are all that remains of the Persphys and Caela Praefecture conurbs.

Techmarine Colbya has established contact with sixteen other nearby shelters, as well as Captain Ventanus in what is now known as Arcology X. Bruscius does not know why its name has been changed, and is just glad that Lord Guilliman saw fit to place Ventanus in control of the fight-back.

The Word Bearers have taken the surface, but the war beneath belongs to the Ultramarines.

Bruscius forces himself to keep such thoughts tamped down.

He has more immediate concerns.

Registration areas have been set up in each of the largest caverns, manned by the few Administratum personnel who escaped below ground. It is a thankless duty, but the citizens of Calth form snaking lines as they await their turn to be processed without complaint. Well over ten thousand people are crammed into this cavern alone, with more pressing in behind. Motorised gurneys drive along cleared lanes between the queues, bearing reams of accumulating paperwork and identity confirmations from the registration booths. The drivers are all Army-helmeted and with rifles slung across their backs.

Bruscius and twenty of his warriors are here to oversee the registration process and watch for any security breaches, but his company will be rotated onto surface patrol soon. He recognises the importance of this work, but Bruscius wants to kill Word Bearers.

His eyes roam over the thousands of people in the cavern, pleased to note the stoic determination on every face. These people have seen their world virtually destroyed, but there is no trace of panic or psychosis. They came with nothing but that which they could carry on their backs when the evacuation order came through, yet still stand proud and ready to serve.

What other citizenry of the Imperium could rally so magnificently?

Almost all are young. All are ragged and grimy. But no amount of dirt can hide the mottled purple radiation burns with which almost every man, woman and child's skin is afflicted. The medicae call it the 'Mark of Calth', and it is as much a badge of honour as it is an injury.

Bruscius moves on, traversing the echoing cavern and counting the hours until he can turn his weapons on the enemy. Everywhere he goes, people turn to stare at him, and he finds the attention faintly discomfiting. He is a warrior, pure and simple, yet these people invest him with all their hopes of a better tomorrow.

It is a heavy burden to bear, one he had not known he shouldered until this moment.

A woman with a babe in arms clutched tight to her breast approaches him and she reaches out to touch his vambrace. Under normal circumstances, Bruscius would never allow such contact, but these are far from normal circumstances. Another two children hold tight to the hem of her skirt, both so young and fragile looking that Bruscius finds it hard to believe they survived the horrors above.

'Emperor protect you,' she says.

Bruscius does not know how to respond and gives the woman a nod. She smiles, and he knows she will treasure the memory for the rest of her days.

The Ultramarines have become touchstones of hope, living proof that Calth will rise again, that its people will one day reclaim what was taken from them. It has been a humbling experience, and a salient reminder of why the Great Crusade was fought in the first place.

The woman holds out her hand, and Bruscius sees a small aquila pendant on a silver chain lying flat against her palm.

'Take it,' she says. 'Please. You have to.'

The Ultramarines have standing orders not to accept gifts from civilians. Despite that, their muster spaces and arming points are surrounded by offerings, tokens of gratitude and handwritten messages declaring a readiness to fight for Calth.

'My thanks, but it is not permitted,' he says, turning away to move on.

'Please,' says the woman, more insistently. '*She* needs you to have it.'

Something in the woman's tone makes him stop and turn back to her.

'Who needs me to have it?' he asks.

The woman tilts her head to the side, as though confused at his question.

‘The saint,’ she says, almost in tears. ‘You need to *see*. Before it is too late.’

Bruscius finds himself reaching for the aquila, though he knows he should not. The woman sighs as though a pent-up breath has just been expelled from her lungs. She looks up at him, and though Bruscius does not easily recognise conventional human expressions, he sees she is surprised to find herself face to face with a Space Marine.

As his hand closes on the silver pendant, combat reactions surge within his post-human body as chem-shunts within his battle armour flood his system with combat stimms in expectation of battle. His bolter snaps up and his visor is suddenly overlaid with tactical schemata, spatial signifiers and topographical data.

A vox-link instantly activates between him and his battle-brothers.

Bruscius has no idea what has triggered this reaction and the woman backs away from him in fear as he goes from heroic saviour to lethal, bio-engineered killer in the blink of an eye. He scans for any sign of threat and immediately sees the motorised gurney bearing boxes of administrative documents and the like.

Two things are immediately obvious.

First, the gurney is laden with heavy boxes, but is heading *towards* the registration booths.

Second, its driver wears Army fatigues, but they are ill-fitting and clearly not his own.

Bruscius sets off at a run towards the gurney, bellowing for people to get out of his way as a terrible foreboding fills him. The driver sees him coming and grins with zealous fury as he halts the gurney in the centre of the cavern.

Bruscius pulls his boltgun tight to his shoulder. A targeting reticule fastens on the man’s centre mass. It flashes red in full expectation of a lethal shot. The man stands and shouts at the top of his voice, with his rifle and a black-bladed dagger held aloft.

‘Hear the Word of Lorgar!’

It is all he manages before Bruscius’s mass-reactive blows out his chest and entire upper body in a wet meat explosion. People duck for cover, clearing a path for Bruscius as his warriors close on his position.

‘Get back!’ shouts Bruscius, kicking the dead man’s remains from the driver’s seat and hauling boxes from the back of the gurney. As he feared, they were concealment for something hidden behind them – a long, crudely-machined tube of thick metal, sealed at both ends by seamed welds and pierced by a multitude of sheathed connection jacks, electrical buffers and decoy wires. Behind a crystalflex panel, Bruscius sees a pair of brushed steel casings marked with the symbols of his Legion.

His armour registers a blazing spike of radiation, but it is the only warning Bruscius gets.

The stolen atomics detonate a second later, filling the cavern with nuclear fire that spreads through the entirety of Shelter CV427/Praxor and kills every living soul within.

It is the first of three such atrocities that murder two million civilians in one night.

X

It still amuses Ventanus that a mark he made in haste upon a wax-paper map has become so synonymous with the defenders of Calth. With Lanshear laid waste by the orbital batteries, the defenders had needed a place to rally. With virtually every data-engine on the planet dead, a pict scan was made of Ventanus’s map with a rally point marked with black ash.

That scan was broadcast through every civilian pict-caster and Legion slate within reach of Lanshear, and thus was named this bastion of resistance.

Arcology X.

Two quick, crosswise slashes on a map and an element of geography became a piece of history.

A symbol of resistance and a talisman to brandish in the face of the enemy.

XI

The caverns are dim. Power consumption is carefully controlled. The few Mechanicum adepts have yet to stabilise a link to the geothermal grid at the heart of Calth. Flickering lumen globes in protective caging are strung from brickwork supports on looping cables like jungle creepers. This close to the surface, the architecture has a martial character, but with every sub-level they traverse, the more civic and functional it becomes.

The walls are etched with metres-high Xs, and hundreds more on every archway and lintel. Among them, Ventanus sees pictures drawn on the walls, serpentine creatures with dark wings and fanged mouths. *Draconis*. He sees a childishness to the scratched lines and wonders if these nightmares have been drawn on the walls as a means of expelling them. Are they memories of the monsters brought forth by the heinous pacts made by the Word Bearers or visions drawn from the nightmares common in the wake of the attack?

News of Ventanus's mission has already reached Arcology X, and the return of the Fourth is greeted with cheers and loud huzzahs from the thousands of civilians packed into its sprawling sub-levels. Someone shouts the word *saviour*, and the cry is taken up by the multitudes packed into the caves. It follows them down the levels as they plunge deeper and deeper into the bedrock of Calth.

Sydance is waiting for them at the gateway to the administration levels.

His cobalt-blue armour is clean and polished. Some of the Legion have made oaths not to remove the dust and blood of war until Calth is reclaimed, but like Ventanus, Lyros Sydance wants the Word Bearers to *see* the Ultramarines are still the regal Battle Kings of Macragge.

No amount of treachery and no grief will ever change that.

But even Sydance has adopted the black X on his shoulder guard, carefully etched between the curved arms of the marbled Ultima. It looks like a Chapter number or a company designation, but it is something far more important.

'You're making a name for yourself down here, Remus,' says Sydance as the chants continue behind them.

'Nothing to do with me, Lyros,' replies Ventanus. 'This has your fingerprints all over it.'

Sydance shrugs and grips Ventanus's wrist. 'A bit of hope and glory never hurt anyone.'

Ventanus does not release Sydance's arm. 'I want it to stop.'

'Why? What you're doing, it's giving people hope.'

'I'm not a saviour,' says Ventanus. 'And I don't like the connotations of the word.'

'You don't have to like it, you just have to endure it.' says Sydance, turning and making his way down the ramp into the cavern. 'Come on, the Server's waiting for you at the Ultimus.'

The war for Calth is being co-ordinated from the lowest level of Arcology X, a cavern seared from the lithosphere by melta drills and seismic charges. Beneath the levels of habitation, engineering and hydroponics, it is a rock-clad dome, some three kilometres in diameter, with numerous branching passageways, sub-galleries, and twisting dead ends radiating from its central void. At its heart stands

a structure of polished marble and glass, utilitarian in elevation, but designed in the shape of the XIII Legion's sigil. Armoured panels encase its lower levels, and Techmarines aboard Tekton-pattern Rhinos work side by side with Mechanicum servitors to transform it into something resembling a strongpoint.

Before the invasion, the building was owned by a trading cartel founded in the time of Guilliman's adoptive father. It is named Konor's Arch, but is now known as the Ultimus. Its robust infrastructure and powerful data-engines – designed to link subsidiary operations across the Five Hundred Worlds – make it the perfect base from which to conduct offensive operations against the remaining Word Bearers.

Such concerns are vital, but once again the symbolism of the structure is paramount.

Hundreds of temporary structures surround the Ultimus, overspill from the levels above. So great were the numbers of refugees fleeing Lanshear that the upper levels quickly filled, and Ventanus had no option but to allow billets to be set up around his command post. He doesn't like it, but has little choice in the matter. There is simply nowhere else for them to go.

Word of their coming has reached the refugees, and people cluster at the edge of the clearway that leads to the gates of the Ultimus. People cheer and wave and clap. They shout his name, and once again call him *saviour*. He keeps his expression neutral, but catches sight of Sydance's amusement.

'You might not like the connotation, but *The Saviour of Calth* has a nice ring to it,' says Sydance. 'It's a title that'll stick, mark my words.'

'So what do they call you?'

'I haven't decided yet,' says Sydance with a grin. 'But we'll all have titles by the end of this.'

Ventanus walks on. He knows Sydance is right, but it still irks him to have the mantle of saviour thrust upon him. He dislikes the self-aggrandisement and its faintly theological undertones, but is canny enough to know that nothing he can do now will stop its spread.

'So, are you going to say it?' asks Sydance.

'Say what?'

'That you were right after all, and that I was wrong.'

'I don't need to,' says Ventanus. 'The truth is self-evident. Six hundred Word Bearers dead without the loss of a single warrior.'

'Yes, very impressive,' agrees Sydance, placing two fingers to his forehead and narrowing his eyes as though in a trance. 'I see many laurels in your future, great statues built in your likeness and a name that echoes through eternity.'

Ventanus allows a thin smile to surface. 'I *will* shoot you if you use those psychic powers again.'

Sydance laughs and turns from Ventanus and addresses the two sergeants behind him.

'Barkha, Selaton, good job.'

The sergeants acknowledge his words, but do not reply.

Ventanus looks up and sees Server Tawren and her newly-acquired retinue of lexmechanics, calculus-logi and data-savants approaching. He is still learning the nuances of human interactions – something forced upon him by increased contact with the populace of Calth in recent weeks – but has become familiar with the hybrid machine/flesh expressions of the Mechanicum.

Tawren has the chimeric qualities common to the members of the Martian priesthood – detachment, aloofness and a disconnect that some see as cold – but right now Ventanus sees nothing of detachment, nothing of disconnect.

What he sees in Tawren's face is an abyss of all too human despair.

'Something has happened,' he says. 'What is it?'

‘CV427/Praxor is gone,’ says Tawren. ‘Two others as well.’

‘Gone?’ he says. ‘What does that mean?’

‘It means that they are radioactive craters hundreds of kilometres wide,’ says Tawren.

XII

Theoretical: deny the Word Bearers the chance to regroup.

Practical: achieve the same for the defenders of Calth.

Result: bring the Ultramarines back into the fight against the Warmaster.

These are the prime directives by which the XIII are operating, but knowing them and achieving them are two very different things.

Gathered around the central plotting table in a gleaming conference chamber that now serves as Calth’s command centre are the men and women Ventanus needs to turn that theoretical into a workable practical.

Sydance and Urath stand shoulder to shoulder, his fellow Fourth Company captain half a head taller than the sergeant of the 39th. Though his rank is inferior to that of Sydance, the hard-faced Urath has given fresh purpose to the scattered survivors of Sullus’s company.

Ventanus will see to it that he receives a captaincy for that.

Server Tawren consults with her Martian acolytes. He cannot see it, but knows there will be a haze of noospheric information buzzing around their heads in veils of data-light. She sifts invisible information with her hands. Behind her, a brutish skitarii clan chief stands, hulking and primitive looking. He has nothing of the calm poise of Cyramica, and is clearly a much lower ranking battle leader. His limbs are sheathed in metal and the lower half of his skull is a tusked, metallic trap like a greenskin’s jaw.

Colonel Hamadri consults a data-slate, her face set in an expression of cold determination. She has a son in the Numinus 61st, but has no knowledge of whether he is alive or dead. Statistical probability favours the latter, but until such time as his death can be confirmed, Hamadri will believe him alive.

This is good. Ventanus needs people around him who can hope against the odds.

Across from Hamadri is Captain Volper Ullyet of the 77th Ingenium Support Division, a heavily-built career officer who in fifty years of service has never left Calth or seen combat before the last few weeks. At first glance, he is an unlikely choice for the command table, but Ventanus sees beyond his service record to his actions during the initial phase of the attack.

Where the shock of the Word Bearers attack left others stupefied, Ullyet reacted in moments. Within four minutes of the attack’s commencement, his battalions of construction engines and earth moving machines were raising redoubts and defensive bulwarks around the main gates of Lanshear’s central arcology.

This, too, is good. Ventanus needs people who can react with speed.

Ingenium Subiaco stands close to Tawren, and his pleasure at being in the presence of a Mechanicum adept is obvious. Subiaco has only the most superficial augmetics, none that cannot be easily removed, and he hero-worships those who commune so directly with the Machine-God. Ankrion tells Ventanus that Subiaco is doing good work in the tunnels, securing the multitude of potential entry points to Arcology X.

The man is exhausted, but refuses to take his rest.

All the mortals are tertiary forces, reservists or commands designated to be rear-echelon units. Most are filled with raw recruits, soldiers raised specifically for the campaign against the Ghaslakh xenohold, a campaign Ventanus now understands to be entirely fictive. The forces still at Lanshear port when the sun died were the last to be embarked, fresh regiments, engineering units or logistical support elements.

Almost none are front-line certified.

Sydance tells Ventanus repeatedly that they are not ready for what he asks of them, and the stark light of the chamber only seems to confirm this. Every face is pinched and knurled with loss and shock. Sydance is right, they are not ready, but Ventanus believes that treachery has honed their previously unfinished edge. Complacency has been purged from their bones by the devastation above.

None beyond the Legion warriors were known to Ventanus before he made Arcology X his base of operations, but he knows them all now. He has made it his business to learn their strengths, their weaknesses and all the human foibles he must factor into his plans. Some think he wastes his time in attempting to understand mortals, but Ventanus knows better.

The only way Space Marines can now function alongside mortals is to understand them.

'Server?' says Ventanus. 'Apprise me.'

Tawren nods and subcutaneous light shimmers through her fingers as she manipulates the plotting table with quick haptic gestures. A static-washed holographic of a giant, smoke-filled crater appears on the table, a hundred kilometres across. It blights the landscape and always will. Pixelated vapour clouds the size of cities are tugged by rogue thermals and atomic vortices.

'You have all heard the news from CV427/Praxor,' she says.

'And the others,' says Colonel Hamadri, her thin face blotchy with untreated rad-burn. 'We lost more than two million people last night.'

Heads nod; the scale of death too terrible to contemplate. Such a vast number is difficult to visualise, too enormous for proper comprehension. Hamadri is a Defence Auxilia colonel, young to hold such rank. Ventanus sees she has heart and that will count for a great deal in the coming years. Hamadri kept her units on the surface as long as possible to allow the greatest number of refugees access to the arcology.

'Do we know what happened?' asks Sydance.

'CV427/Praxor was an armaments stockpile for the orbital platforms and Legion warships,' says Tawren. 'Given the electro-magnetic signatures and recorded yields from the three blast sites, it seems likely that enemy infiltrators were able to modify and detonate a number of warheads from the cyclonic torpedoes stored there.'

'How is that possible?' demands Hamadri. 'Those weapons are under Mechanicum protection. Don't you people have security systems in place to stop that kind of thing? It's your fault they're dead!'

Tawren is visibly distressed by Hamadri's accusation and her knuckles whiten as she grips the edge of the plotter table. Holographic clouds bend towards her in response.

'That's enough, colonel,' says Ventanus. His tone leaves no room to argue, but Tawren raises a hand. She does not need him to defend her and answers Hamadri with remarkable calm.

'Yes, we have ritual protocols to prevent such breaches, but the systemic corruption introduced to the planetary noosphere compromised a great many of our liturgical security systems.'

'I thought your killcode got rid of it,' says Hamadri.

Tawren nods. 'The killcode of Magos Hesst burned the enemy scrapcode in a firestorm of numerical carnage, yes, but one that was indiscriminate in its purging. Many of our own systems were

left crippled in the wake of the restoration of command authority. Those systems are even now being restored.'

'So could this happen again?' asks Ullyet.

'I have personally inspected the security protocols at all other such weapon caches,' says Tawren.

'That's not what I asked,' says Ullyet.

'Yes, it is,' replies Tawren and her certainty is palpable.

Ullyet nods, the matter settled.

'So how do we answer this atrocity?' Sydance asks. 'We'll hit the bastards hard for this.'

They respond to Sydance's words, and Ventanus sees the desire for vengeance in every face. He remembers his fellow captain espousing the same retributive mantra upon his arrival at Leptius Numinus. It is a primal and eminently understandable urge to strike back at those who have wronged them, but it is as ill-advised now as it was then.

Ventanus leans forward and places both hands on the edge of the table.

'We answer by staying alive to finish the fight,' he says. 'We continue co-ordinating what forces remain combat-effective and devise a practical from that. The dead of Praxor are gone, and nothing will bring them back. Grieve when Calth is free, but while you are in this room, you all belong to me. Understand and accept that or get out.'

Stony silence greets his words. They hate his cold objectivity, his apparent lack of concern for the dead. Ventanus cares nothing for their approval. But he has to give them something, some spark to light the fire in their hearts. He is not good with such words, and these are the best he can do.

'The Word Bearers will pay for this, but this war will not be won with impulse, it will be won with cool heads and solid practical. We fight for the living and we kill for the dead. Say it with me.'

The silence stretches.

'Say it with me,' he says again.

Heads nod, fists are made over hearts.

'We fight for the living and we kill for the dead!'

XIII

Radioactive winds howl across Leprium, sounding hot and crackling in his helmet. The counter reads high, but his war-plate can withstand this intensity for days before its systems will need time to recharge. Maloq Kartho looks up into a sky laced with a poisoned borealis and heartsick rainbows of stellar fallout. The cascade of exotic particles and heavy metals will leave Calth a polluted wasteland from now until its star finally burns out and engulfs the entire Veridian system.

For all Kartho knows, that could be in millions of years or it could be tomorrow.

He cares not either way. He will never return to Calth.

It is reckless to stand so brazenly on the surface, but the powers to whom he owes fealty demand no less. Devastation surrounds him, the sprawling ruin of a dead city: twisted steel, shattered permacrete and broken glass. Upturned tanks and supply containers that fell from the ruptured bellies of bulk tenders straining for orbit are scattered everywhere.

Amidst the destruction, a statue fashioned from bronze, but now heavy with grey ash, stands at the end of a grand processional. It is a heroic representation of the mortal who raised Guilliman as his own.

Konor, the first Battle King of Macragge.

Bodies lie in drifts around the statue, as though the doomed populace of Leprium believed his legacy might somehow protect them from the slaughter. Kartho pities them their ignorance of the galaxy's true divine masters.

A wrecked Imperator Titan stands sentinel over the ruins, hot, neutron-rich vortices gusting between its legs and sagging carapace. Its chest battlements are blown out and half its head section is missing. Grey dust falls in drifts from its listing carapace, but it is impossible to tell whether its loyalty was to Horus or the Emperor.

'One of ours or one of theirs?' asks Hol Beloth, emerging from the shelter of a tumbledown ruin of flooring plates and corrugated roof slabs. The commander has embraced his duty of atrocity with all the zeal one would expect of one of Lorgar's sons. The murder of the civilian shelters has galvanised him, and the touch of the Bloody One fills his body with power.

That he thinks such banal deaths will be enough to save him makes Kartho's lip curl in a mixture of amusement and contempt.

'Who knows?' says Kartho. 'At this point it hardly matters.'

'Could it be salvaged? Turned against the Thirteenth?'

Kartho shakes his head in disbelief. Hol Beloth mistakes this for his answer.

'I suppose it *is* too badly damaged,' says Hol Beloth.

That the fool believes there is still a war to be won on Calth is laughable. The Word Bearers' victory has already been achieved and the fate of this rock is irrelevant.

Yes, the Ultramarines were not as humbled as Kor Phaeron desired, but they are broken as a fighting force. Spent. They will waste their efforts to reclaim a world that has no value. Lorgar has likely already forgotten Calth.

The powers beyond the Great Eye have their gaze turned upon the Golden One, and the burning of Ultramar is just the beginning of his grand schemes.

Maloq Kartho has ambitions of his own, and what he does here is simply the next step on his path to glory. He already feels his unnamed shadow moving through the darkness, an ink-black leviathan that swallows worlds and exterminates species for its fleeting amusement. He senses it hunting fresh prey even now, mortal beings who have somehow managed to escape Calth by means that should be impossible.

His hand slips over the glass surface of his warp-flask as he senses its squirming, reptilian hunger. Whoever it hunts must be special indeed to have elicited such pleasure in one so vast as to be beyond human understanding.

'We shouldn't be out here,' says Hol Beloth, breaking into Kartho's thoughts. The commander looks up into the wide sky. He feels too exposed to enjoy its technicolor death-throes. 'You saw what happened to Lanshear.'

'I did,' agreed Kartho. 'And it was wondrous. But still we wait.'

'You will see us all killed,' says Hol Beloth, lapsing into uneasy silence.

Hol Beloth feels acutely vulnerable here without his army, but to bring such numbers to the surface would bring the wrath of the Ultramarines orbital guns down upon them within moments. Besides, thinks Kartho, the brotherhoods will soon serve a much grander purpose where they are.

Kartho cast his augurs wide in choosing the legionaries who would accompany them. To achieve his goal, only the deadliest warriors could hope to survive. Only the most devoted and ruthless.

There are few as single-minded in their adoration as Eriesh Kigal.

Encased in a war-scarred suit of Terminator armour, Kigal stands head and shoulders above Kartho, his arched pauldrons and slab-like breastplate dancing with static and irradiated dust. Each

fist is a lightning claw and his daemon-visaged helm now bears two curling horns. Six similarly clad warriors stand with Kigal, armed with a mix of combi-bolters, lightning claws, chainfists and energised warhammers. They bear the mark of the Octed upon their shoulders, and Kartho has inscribed each veteran's scarred faceplate with his own personal sigil.

Towering over them all is a silent Dreadnought with a casket-plate bearing the etched name of Zu Gunara. Kartho knows nothing of that warrior; whatever flesh-scraps once sloshed in amniotic grease within have now been devoured by a void-hard darkness with teeth and eyes. The hulking war-machine is no longer simply a Dreadnought, but a thing of the night with iron fists.

'So what are we waiting for?' asks Hol Beloth, pacing back and forth in the shadow of a soot-blackened metal pressing plant.

'For the bringers of a mighty gift,' says Kartho, seeing a dust cloud threading its way through the ruins. The coughing splutter of a labouring engine echoes dully across the ashen remnants of the broken city. Hol Beloth hears it too and his hand goes to the crowned hilt of his sword.

'Ultramarines?' he asks.

'No.'

'How can you be sure?'

'Because we are still alive,' says Kartho as a wide-bodied industrial vehicle with a transport compartment at the rear comes into view. It ploughs through the knee-high dust between the gutted buildings, riding low on its suspension, heavy with potential. The remains of a spread-eagled skeleton are lashed to the roof of the vehicle. Only the pitted, corroded plates of carapace armour and shreds of uniform hold the body together. No flesh remains on the skeleton, the bones bleached the pallor of ash.

'Major Kadene, I presume,' says Kartho with a throaty chuckle.

Hol Beloth looks strangely at him, but he doesn't satisfy his curiosity.

Though he has dismissed Hol Beloth's concerns, Kartho looks up for any sign of their having been discovered. He has chosen his moment carefully. The clashing electromagnetic storm should render any geo-sats overhead blind to this portion of the city.

'Come,' says Kartho, and he and Hol Beloth step from the shelter of the covering structure.

Kigal's Terminators and Zu Gunara follow them through the detritus of the flattened metropolis. Structures designed to withstand earthquake, fire and flood have been brought low by war, and the sight pleases Kartho greatly.

The vehicle wheezes towards them, finally stopping in the shadow of Konor's statue. Its blue paintwork has flaked off, as though burned away from the inside. The bare metal of its frame and panels is already corroding. The Terminators lock the double barrels of their guns on the driver's window. Kartho hears the buzz of target acquisition lasers and ranging motors over the city's groaning lament of steel and the dusty susurration of the wind.

The vehicle's crew doors open and Kartho smells the rich aroma of decaying meat. A man bearing the mark of the Brotherhood lurches from the cab's interior and Kartho sees death upon him. He wears it proudly, a mass of rotten tissue that weeps milky fluid from the rampant sores covering every visible centimetre of his skin. His eyes are yellow, veined with ruptured capillaries and virtually blind with cataracts.

Hol Beloth draws his sword as he sees the man wears the uniform of the enemy.

He has not yet realised that this man is one of their own. Another brotherhood acolyte emerges from the opposite door, and his afflictions are even worse. Blood leaks from every pore and wind-borne dust abrades the flesh from his bones with every gust.

Kartho sees a third man through the warped glass of the canopy. His skin has peeled from his skull and he stares sightlessly at the Dark Apostle through fluid-filled sockets. His hands are fused with the steering column in some strange biological symbiosis. Blind, and enduring unspeakable torment, he has been guided here by the dark monarchs of the warp.

Hol Beloth reaches into the vehicle and rips the driver's insignia from his uniform. A flap of wet meat comes with it and flops to the dust. He looks at the insignia, and it takes him a second to make the connection. Kartho steps around the vehicle, to where the dying men are pulling back a heavy tarpaulin. Hol Beloth appears at his side as the weapon they have come for is revealed.

It is spherical in shape, and smaller than Kartho had expected. A metre long, including the protective metal case. Its surfaces are smooth, the blue paint gone, leaving its body a dull grey that matches the former colour of the Word Bearers.

An unambiguous warning symbol is acid-etched onto its side.

A circular ring, with three splayed arms radiating from its centre to form three circles in a pyramid form. Since the earliest days, this has been the sigil of an elemental power, an unknowing rendition of the fear of pestilence carried in the hearts and minds of mortals since the dawn of time.

Hol Beloth holds up the driver's insignia. 'These men came from the Praxor shelter before it was destroyed.'

'That they did,' agrees Kartho.

The shadow of Zu Gunara falls over them as the Dreadnought lifts the warhead from the transport compartment. It is heavy and the vehicle visibly lifts from the dust. The men whose flesh is slipping from their frames like wet cloth sigh in pleasure.

'Is this what I think it is?' asks Hol Beloth.

Kartho nods.

He feels the warp-flask at his hip squirm with agitation. With the acquisition of this weapon of total destruction, his union with the immaterial creature grows ever closer. Kartho feels its resistance. It wants to finish its hunt, but the fates have decreed their joining and nothing will prevent it.

'We cannot fight the Ultramarines conventionally,' says Kartho. 'We are newborn Catachan Devils in a bottle, each capable of killing the other, but only at the risk of his own life.'

The Terminators level their guns at the brotherhood warriors.

'That is not how we will fight,' continues Kartho.

The dying men drop to their knees and spread their arms in gratitude. Bare bone gleams. Ribs shine wetly through sloughing flesh. A bark of gunfire tears their dissolving bodies apart in an explosion of rotten matter. Flaming lumps of meat spatter the buildings nearby.

Eriesh Kigal affixes melta-charges to the vehicle. There must be no trace of it left for the geo-sats to discover. The intense heat will vaporise the transport and kill off any traces of biological taint. The Ultramarines must have no warning of the new threat that has emerged from the weapon stores of CV427/Praxor.

'How do you intend to use it?' asks Hol Beloth.

'How do you think?' says Maloq Kartho. 'I am going to use it to kill Calth.'

XIV

A haze of light lies over the plotting table's surface like a low-lying fog. Drifting particulates are caught in the diffuse light of the holos, causing flickering refraction errors in the topography

displayed. It is Calth's surface, rendered in greens, browns and yellow. Icons representing Ultramarines positions and their allies are marked in gold and blue; known Word Bearers and cultist positions in hostile red.

Two consistent red icons are of greatest concern to Ventanus – one in the heart of the foundries north of Lanshear, the other within the Uranik Radial.

'How often do the geo-sats initiate a surface augur?' asks Sydance as Tawren zooms in on each icon, friendly and hostile. Time stamps appear above each one.

The most recent is six hours old.

'Access to orbital auguries is still sporadic,' she says, shifting the map around with thought impulses through the MIU cabling plugged into the table. 'Most of the geo-sats were knocked out in the first moments of the attack. The few that remain are slaved to the orbital weapon platforms to alert us to any surface movements of Word Bearers forces.'

Ventanus repeats Sydance's question. 'How often?'

'Every ten hours,' says Tawren. 'That's as much inload as the Ultimus noosphere can accommodate until more powerful data-engines can augment its capacity.'

'That's a long time,' says Hamadri.

'A long time?' snaps Sydance, shaking his head. 'It's a lifetime. This map is worthless. Remus, we can't devise theoretical, let alone practical, from data that's ten hours old.'

'Six hours,' says Ventanus.

'It could be six or ten *minutes* and it would be just as bad,' says Sydance.

'The map is as accurate as circumstances allow,' responds Tawren, as the map zooms out.

'You're overlooking one thing, Lyros,' says Ventanus.

'I am? What?'

'There are more gold icons today than there were yesterday,' he says. 'Every day our forces grow. The Word Bearers can have no such expectation. Server, how many more loyalist forces have you established contact with since the last update?'

'Thirteen more underground shelters and sealed cave systems are now confirmed,' answers Tawren, and the new additions bob like eager children on the map.

'Two weeks ago we were broken and scattered, on the verge of extermination,' says Ventanus. 'Now we have co-ordination with nearly forty thousand of our Legion brothers, a quarter of a million Army and Mechanicum assets and sixteen Legio Titanicus engines. Every day brings us closer to becoming a globally unified force. The Word Bearers are alone, cut off from every hope of aid. They are fighting just to stay alive, but we fight for Calth.'

Ventanus spreads his hands to encompass the gold icons on the table.

He sees renewed hope. His words promise them a victory, but they think the war will be won in a matter of months. They think the Word Bearers will be pushed from Calth without difficulty.

They are wrong, and Ventanus needs to bring some cold reality to the table.

Using the manual controls, he highlights the area of the map that shows the two red symbols that trouble him the most. Force disposition icons and unit identifiers flicker to life as he manipulates the controls. The data is old and incomplete, but together with what he has seen with his own eyes, it is enough.

'A Word Bearers commander named Foedral Fell is building a fortress in the northern foundry districts,' he says. 'And Hol Beloth, the warlord who razed Lanshear, has regrouped beneath the Uranik Radial. Beloth seems to have adopted a holdfast position, so we can discount him for now, but we can't allow Fell to establish a secure base in the north.'

‘You have a theoretical?’ asks Sydance, eager to be unleashed.

‘I do,’ grins Ventanus. ‘We march north and kill the bastard.’

XV

The tunnels around Ingenium Subiaco are gloomy, and lit by dancing flames that he cannot see. Each passage bears the hallmarks of being naturally formed, but their dimensions are too perfect, too geometric to be anything other than artificial. The underground structures of Calth are an ingenium’s idea of paradise, a realm where geology, engineering and art come together. There are few underground cavern systems he has not visited, mapped and devised great schemes for linking.

An entire underground planetary ecology: self-sustaining and self-perpetuating.

His plans are even now being put into action – designs, philosophies and practical means of achieving their completion have been transmitted to most of the largest subterranean shelters for implementation.

The cavern is a glistening silver colour, suggestive of the eastern arcologies, the walls wet and dripping. Ingenium Subiaco has never feared solitude. He has found peace in the quiet times spent at a drafting slate, buried in a technical librarium or immersed in the design theory of the great thinkers of previous ages. He enjoys time spent with friends and family, but he acknowledges that he quickly reaches a point where he wishes to be alone.

Those closest to him know this about him and recognise the signs of his wandering attention and nascent irritability. They make allowances for him and Subiaco is grateful for their understanding of what he knows is a flaw in his character.

Subiaco relishes solitude and the chance to immerse himself in his work.

But this is something else entirely; he is utterly alone.

This is not just the absence of people, but the absence of the *existence* of other people.

Ingenium Subiaco understands with total clarity that he is the only man alive on Calth.

He does not know where he is and has no memory of coming here.

Each cave mouth is a yawning abyss, a pathway to horror or a gateway to some dreadful terror, locked away in ages past and now free to climb to the surface.

Caves and their exploration hold no terror for Subiaco. He has squirmed through the tiniest of cracks and pushed his wiry frame into some of the most inaccessible cave systems this planet has to offer, but these yawning entrances scare him more than anything.

He cannot count how many there are; every time his gaze shifts, the cavern seems to rearrange its walls and the black-limned cave mouths constrict without appearing to move. Subiaco feels hot breath exhale from the nearest cave, and backs away.

Which route leads to the surface? Do any of them?

He can see none of the cave markings etched by the earliest explorers, designed to aid the lost in finding their way back to the surface. It is as though this cave has never been trod by Calth’s people. Laughter drifts from somewhere and he spins around as shadows chase one another over the walls.

Drifts of steam sigh from cracks in the floor, but there is no heat to them. In fact, the cavern is like a storage chiller. His breath mists the air and he sees crackling daggers of ice form on overhanging crags of rock.

‘This isn’t real,’ he says, finally making the intuitive leap to realise that he’s dreaming.

But Subiaco is wise enough to see that understanding this and ending it are two very different

things.

Orange light seeps into the cavern, the glimmer of distant fires. Subiaco remembers a crumbling text borne to Calth from Terra itself and said to be tens of thousands of years old. Its stasis-sealed pages spoke of a place far below the ground where all the devils and evil-doers of the world would be sent upon their deaths. This was said to be a place of fire and torment. With the sky above him and the light of the sun on his face, Subiaco scoffed at such ancient superstition, but here in the darkness, his animal core quails in fear.

The deep flames are growing hotter and the walls of the cavern begin to drip, sloughing their substance as though shaped from wax and not solid rock. The entire cavern structure is disintegrating, coming undone with the speed of an unmasked lie. The walls flake and peel away like cinders in a fire, the ceiling falling in a rain of blood-soaked ash.

And behind that waxen veneer, a swaying mesh of iron lath and haphazardly constructed supports. It is a madman's structure that cannot possibly support the burden being placed upon it.

And beyond that, a howling void of utter emptiness.

No... not empty. Not empty at all.

Unimaginably huge shapes move within the void, leviathans that have outgrown the paltry scale of the word.

It horrifies Subiaco that this fragile lattice is all that stands between him and these monsters. He backs away from the nearest chain-link wall as a vast eye blinks before him. Subiaco only knows it is an eye because a pupil the size of a small moon dilates as it notices him. The structure around him trembles, and the shockwaves spread to the farthest reaches of the caves. He hears the sound of groaning steelwork and the grinding squeal of metal on metal. Something breaks over to his left and Subiaco hears the *tap*, *tap*, *tap* of steel claws at the iron lath. Hears it buckling and pulled apart.

Cackling laughter bubbles from somewhere that could be a thousand kilometres away or could be right behind him. Subiaco does not wait to find out and runs in what he hopes is the opposite direction. He hears the scrape of metal-sheathed bodies pushing their way through tears that are too small for their impossible forms. He hears the shrieks of their pain and the howls of their hunger. He keeps running, knowing better than to look back and see what is chasing him.

All he knows is that he has to get away.

He runs, and the sound of hundreds of polished steel blades echoes around him. They shed sparks that light the unravelling reality in strobing flashes and throw out elongated shadows of malformed limbs, distended jaws and gutting fangs.

Subiaco screams as he hears thousands more of the amorphous, bladed *things* beyond the lattice pushing their way into the collapsing cave structure. They will kill him if they catch him, but he fears that what will come after will be far worse.

Then, ahead, a miracle.

A great adamantium door, a towering portal that more accurately deserves – and utterly owns – the title of *gate*. It alone has resisted the dissolution of the caverns. It alone retains its solidity in the face of the corruption from beyond that unmakes all it touches. The gate is black and glossy, built from cyclopean blocks of titanic stone hewn from the depths of a lightless ocean. It is sealed at its centre by a great golden circle upon which is wrought a complex alchemical and mathematical equation.

The Clockwork Angel.

It is an ancient problem, but one that is known to Subiaco. He understands with the clarity only terror can impart that its solution will open the gate. An ornate keyboard of brass and jet sits at the centre of the great seal and his fingers make quick stabs at the black keys.

Gears spin, pins unlock and interleaved discs of gleaming metal separate as the lock disengages and the seal splits down the middle. Golden light spills through the gap between the leaves of the gate as it opens. It is cleansing and purifying, so bright that it threatens to blind him.

Subiaco shields his eyes from the radiance, feeling its welcoming heat spread over him.

Behind him, he hears the screams of the bladed beasts pursuing him. The light is lethal to them, it burns and unweaves the dark power holding their bodies. The golden light spreads, undoing the damage done to the fragile walls of reality. Its healing energy is wondrous and the corruption beyond the veil is helpless before it, driven back beyond the barriers that keep it from invading the realms of sanity and order.

The light envelops Subiaco, and he lets it...

...and his eyes open to find his wife standing above him, her face lined with fear. He sits up, and winces as a spasm of pain shoots up his spine. The cot-bed is uncomfortable, but is a great deal softer than a bedroll on the ground. He sees his daughter curled in the corner of their assigned room, her blanket pulled up around her knees. She looks at him with wide, frightened eyes.

'I was having a nightmare,' he says, letting out a shuddering breath.

'Everyone's having nightmares,' says his wife, slipping her arms around him and resting her head on his shoulder.

'I'm not surprised,' he says, looking at the walls of their quarters as though they might disintegrate at any moment and reveal the horror behind them. He listens and thinks he can hear the faint *tap*, *tap*, *tap* of polished steel claws.

'What was it about?' asks his wife. 'Your nightmare.'

'I don't remember,' he says.

XVI

The Ultramarines move out in force. Fifteen hundred warriors leave Arcology X in a kilometre-long column of heavy armour. The armoured gates open onto the blue-lit wastelands and Legion strength – enough to subdue a world – rides out to war. Ventanus leads them, shuttered within the commander's compartment of a Shadowsword. The super-heavy's interior is not designed for post-humans, but he has found a way to press his bulk into a space designed for a mortal body.

The interior of the super-heavy smells of grease, engine oil, sweat and sickly-sweet gusts of pine-scented incense. He hears the crew chatter over the vox, but tunes it out. He does not need to hear their operational back and forth. Not yet.

Though he holds no belief in the Machine-God of Mars, Ventanus gives a curt nod to the skull-stamped cog symbol on the bulkhead beside him. Though it goes against his grain, he touches the image with his fingertips. Not for luck, but to honour the Mechanicum forces that helped bring Calth back from the brink.

Hesst, Cyramica, Uldort and the thousands of others whose names he will never know.

As if in acknowledgement of his gesture of respect, the slates around him chime with inloading data. Reels of waxy paper spit from chattering ticker-tapes, Tawren's feed from the cogitators of Arcology X. Geo-sat imagery fills the slate before him, a haze of information four hours old that bathes his cut-glass features in a ghostly ochre light.

Their attack will reach the outer edges of Foedral Fell's foundry strongpoint in around another five hours. Ventanus plans to launch his attack immediately after the geo-sats pass overhead and paint the

most up-to-date picture of the tactical situation. Nearly a hundred Land Speeders with enclosed crew compartments skim the ruins before them, feeding back more immediate intelligence on the ground ahead, optimal attack vectors and revisions to the proposed route.

It is not the way Ventanus would want to launch such a vital assault, but he suspects that few engagements in the coming war will be fought in ideal circumstances.

The landscape around Ventanus is bleached of colour by the display, but even rendered in monochrome the horror of such planetary holocaust shocks him. He saw this devastation unleashed first hand. He knows how terrible it was, but to see the surface of Calth like this is a stark reminder that this is not a warzone that nature will eventually reclaim.

This is all that Calth will ever be.

Lanshear is a skeletal steel ruin, its acreage of efficient platforms and guildhalls now a blackened, shadow-haunted wasteland. Numinus fares little better, and the spaces between them are littered with the detritus of wounded strato-carriers: flattened supply crates, ruptured barrels and upended cargo containers. Most split apart on impact, spreading their contents over thousands of square kilometres of the surface. Rifles, uniforms, food packets, boots, medicae supplies and the millions of other items required by campaigning forces at war.

It is as if a dozen armies marched through and discarded everything they were carrying before vanishing. None of the scattered items can be salvaged. All are too irradiated now to be of use. The crumpled spine of the *Antrodamicus* groans on the plains beyond Numinus City. The starship's plated hull is buckled and holed in a thousand places. Ventanus remembers watching it fall from the sky, a sight no sane mind could have imagined. Smoke still billows from its gutted interior, weeks after it crashed into the surface like an extinction-level meteorite.

It reminds Ventanus of a great plains-dwelling leviathan brought down by rapacious predator packs. A marvel of technology that once travelled between the stars in service to the greatest vision of mankind, reduced to rusting wreckage. A mighty king of the void brought low by treachery and left to rot on the world that most likely saw its keel first laid down.

Towers stand on the horizon like broken teeth in a rotten gum, backlit by flames from the raging fires of the refinery wells. Towering drilling rigs sway, their surfaces corroding in the stellar radiation. Ventanus sees the death of a world in all directions, cities reduced to ashen deserts, proud hubs of industry shattered beyond reclamation and entire habitation rings pounded to glassy ruin.

Calth was never the most beauteous planet of Ultramar, but Ventanus has seen enough of the galaxy to know it was a handsome one. It had not the wonder of Prandium, its cities were not the architectural marvels of Konor, and its oceans were not as majestic as those of Macragge.

Yet few worlds can match the industry of its people. Every inhabitant of Ultramar is hard-working, but the people of Calth are fiercely proud of their reputation as the hardest workers in the Five Hundred Worlds. Its shipyards on the surface and in orbit constructed more warships than many dedicated forge worlds, and no vessel bearing the stamp of a Calth shipwright ever failed in combat.

All of that is gone.

Calth's people endure, but the world they fight for no longer exists.

Ventanus remembers the Calth that was.

The dead world around him is the Calth that *is*.

Ventanus splits his Ultramarines into four spearheads, the faster vehicles moving on the flanks while the super-heavies and Dreadnoughts advance up the centre. Ventanus commands this element. Selaton commands the left, Sydance the right. Urath of the 39th will rendezvous with them at the Malonik Transit, and the strike force will swell as more of their scattered brothers bleed in from each of the Lanshear Arterials.

The *Burning Cloud*, the Titan that killed the traitor engine *Mortis Maxor*, marches over the buckled superhighway of the Tarxis Traverse, its warhorn echoing mournfully over the ruins. Captain Aethon's warriors are sweeping down from the north, but his force will only join with Ventanus when they meet in the middle of Foedral Fell's ruined fortress.

The last element of the assault force is Eikos Lamiad.

Tetrarch of Ultramar, Primarch's Champion. Eikos of the Arm they call him now; his army is an eclectic muster of forces stitched together from the survivors of the parched deserts and burning muster fields around the Holophusikon. Army, skitarii and Defence Auxilia rally to his banner, together with the great Telemechrus – the Sky Warrior, the twice-birthed.

With his arm lost to Word Bearers bolts, Lamiad's warriors have declared themselves his Shield Bearers. Already the survivors of the attack are building a mythology.

Perhaps there is something to Sydance's assertion that they will all have names of legend by the time this war is done. Something to inter in the museum of the future.

Ventanus drags his thoughts from potential futures to the present.

He has brought together a force greater than any assembled since the muster. This is an appropriate response. What little information Tawren was able to collate from the brief link with the Word Bearers cogitators before the betrayal indicates that Foedral Fell is a war-leader of great prowess and charisma.

If he is allowed to effectively rally the Word Bearers, the war for Calth will take decades.

That cannot be allowed to happen.

His fortress stronghold in the foundry districts must be razed to the ground.

The going is slower than Ventanus would like, but his time-table has allowed for this. A number of paths thought clear from orbital pict-capture are proving to be impassable on the ground. The Land Speeders are creating passage with their guns or feeding back updated routes.

In five hours the co-ordinated arms of the Ultramarines assault will be at the outskirts of Foedral Fell's stronghold, within minutes of the fresh telemetry from orbit.

And armed with the most up-to-date information at his disposal, Ventanus will wipe Foedral Fell from the face of Calth.

XVIII

Hol Beloth follows Maloq Kartho into the ruins of a Lanshear starscraper whose spine has been broken. The towering structure lost its upper three hundred storeys when the portside void array of the *Antrodamicus* sheared them away with the precision of a thousand-metre blade. The shock of that impact buckled the ventral pier and robbed the building of its structural integrity. The starscraper creaks and groans in the howling winds, and wide cracks have spread from the floor to the metres-thick support columns.

It is only a matter of time until the tower collapses.

Neither this nor their proximity to a known Ultramarines stronghold seems to bother Maloq Kartho,

who leads their small warband into the corpse-choked atrium. Concussive force from an engine engagement three kilometres away on the Niansur Lateral blew out the building's heliotropic windows, and the scorched bodies are shrouded in ash-stained glass with brittle reflections.

Eriesh Kigal and his Terminators have said little since they took possession of the weapon from the disintegrating cult-warriors. Zu Gunara is even more uncommunicative, and Hol Beloth is beginning to feel like less of a commander, and more of a passenger.

'Why are we here?' he asks, stopping in the midst of the corpses. A flaking skull, black and pitted, stares up at him, the jaw sagging open with the vibration of his footfall. He crushes it beneath his boot.

'You ask a question that has vexed the greatest minds since man first learned to walk upright,' replies Kartho. He puts a hand out to support himself, as though weary from their trek across the shattered hinterlands of Calth. Their armour is straining to keep the worst of the radiation at bay, and the power capacitors in their backpacks will need to be charged soon.

Yet what they have endured is nowhere near enough to tire the Dark Apostle.

Only now does Hol Beloth realise that Kartho no longer has his Octed staff.

'You know what I mean,' says Hol Beloth. 'Here. This building. Why?'

Kartho cranes his neck upwards, looking through the great void at the building's heart. Hol Beloth follows his gaze. Dust and particles of glass spin in light filtered through the broken windows. They form strange patterns, spirals, loops and hints of suggested forms just out of reach. For the briefest moment, Hol Beloth sees something in the dancing motes, but it slips from perception even as he thinks he sees it.

'We are here to witness something,' says Kartho, as though that explains everything.

'Witness what?' demands Hol Beloth, his hand curling around the leather-wrapped grip of his sword. He no longer cares if the muttering shadows attack him, he simply wants answers.

'A moment in history,' says Kartho, holding up his hand to forestall another angry outburst at his cryptic answer. 'Contrary to what some believe, the universe is not a sterile place. It is a grand melodrama, a tapestry of consequences, both man-made and celestial. Most are minor things, easily missed, but some are of galactic significance, universal even. And these dramas must be witnessed if they are to register in the universal paean to the dark monarchs. A number of such dramas are close, and we are here to bear witness to one.'

'What's going to happen?' asks Hol Beloth.

Kartho sighs and says, 'Climb with me and we will witness it together.'

Hol Beloth looks back up the atrium. Even with its top sliced away, the starscraper still soars to a height of nearly a kilometre and a half.

'I suppose it's too much to hope that the transit lifts still have power?' says Hol Beloth.

Kartho laughs, a mockery of the sound.

'Good drama is earned,' he says, setting off towards a dust and corpse-choked stairwell. 'And, trust me, you won't want to miss this.'

XIX

Like everything to do with the war on Calth, Foedral Fell's stronghold is a thing of ugliness. Dismantled manufactoria have provided the raw materials for his fortifications: sharp-edged bastions, low-lying artillery deflectors and sunken blockhouses. It is a cancerous blight on the

landscape, a fog-wreathed, orange-lit vision of damnation. Tar-black smoke streams up like claw marks on a canvas, and the air stinks of petrochemical fires.

Ventanus remembers a Word Bearer who called himself Morpal Cxir who claimed that Foedral Fell's warhost numbered in the tens of thousands. Those numbers will have been decimated by Tawren's orbital strikes, but by how much is the real question.

'Come on...' he mutters, watching the counter on the main slate diminish.

At last it reaches zero, and heart-stopping seconds pass before the combat logister flickers to life. Real-time data inloads from the geo-sats. Information pours in. Ventanus processes it instantaneously, parsing tactical feeds on avenues of approach, heat signatures, topographical layouts and enemy troop dispersals. He had feared that the Word Bearers might have their own scouts in place and be ready for them, but it now appears that he was wrong to credit the enemy with such foresight.

Readiness icons flash on the logister as the information passes down to his force commanders. They have seen what he has seen, they are hungry for this fight: dogs of war, straining to be let slip. Even Lamiad defers to his command. It is Ventanus's right and honour to give the word.

His theoretical is solid. The practical is in place. They all know it.

'All commands, unleash havoc,' orders Ventanus.

XX

The plotter table within the Ultimus is not designed to handle military-grade inloads. Its Lexaur-Kale photon arrays were designed to distribute system-wide shipping timetables and manifest lists, not co-ordinate Legion war-planning. Server Tawren has been forced to make numerous alterations to its bio-organic cognitive centres.

Most are sanctioned modifications, but a few are those taught to her by Koriel Zeth during her apprenticeship at the Magma City. Not forbidden, per se, but frowned upon. Hesst would have approved, and the thought of her binary life-partner observing her work makes her smile.

Colonel Hamadri and Captain Ullyet are present, but they are ghosts to her. Unaugmented and without noospheric enablement, little more than blurs in her peripheral vision. All she sees is data. They are speaking softly, but she does not hear them.

Calth's atmospherics are lousy with rad-squalls, but Tawren has learned to compensate for this. She adjusts her filters and the optics of the geo-sats respond to her commands. Static blurs. Holographics waver. Resolution refreshes and she sees what she needs to see.

She reads the energy signatures of buried power sources, thermal blooms from what are most likely barrack structures. Everything the Word Bearers have tried to hide is laid bare before her and she relishes the godlike aspect to her current position.

Everything she is seeing is consistent with the deployment characteristics known of the Word Bearers. Heat patterns are consistent with Legiones Astartes power plants, and this reassures her that nothing significant has changed since the last exload from the geo-sats.

Half a dozen savants and logi are plugged into the table, each assigned to a command element of the assault force. The geo-sats send their findings back to Arcology X in compressed data blurts, which are then passed to the attacking Ultramarines. Each Space Marine commander has his own dedicated battle-savant to break the data inloads into packets of information more easily digested by those without cognitive process augmetics.

The bio-architecture of Space Marine brains is greatly enhanced compared to mortals, but they are

not Mechanicum.

'Geo-sats will remain overhead for another fifty-three seconds,' says a savant with dark skin and warm eyes that are still his own. 'Five three seconds.'

His accent is equator-thick, and Tawren likes the flexing epenthesis of his words.

She watches the inloading data spread through the plotting table, the gold icons moving in a carefully orchestrated ballet. Everything moves with precision. Every sweep and thrust made by the warriors of the XIII is perfectly co-ordinated.

It does not feel like watching a battle, it feels like watching a *replay* of a battle.

Her eyes flick to a noospheric countdown hovering over the rune indicating the force element containing Captain Ventanus.

XXI

The Shadowsword fills with crackling electrical feedback as its main gun fires. Static charge lifts energised dust fragments from armour plates and makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand to attention. Ventanus could have ridden into battle within a Land Raider, but the awesome destructive potential of the Shadowsword was too great to resist.

On the grainy pict-slate before him, a wall disintegrates as the super-heavy's main gun obliterates it. This is a tank capable of killing battle engines. An ad-hoc fortification has no chance. Bodies tumble from the wreckage, cultist bodies. Those that are still recognisable as human are on fire.

Ventanus cannot hear their screams, but wishes he could.

His capacity to enjoy the suffering of his enemies has become something feral.

Ventanus activates the pressure seals that isolate his forward station from the rest of the super-heavy. He wants to see Foedral Fell's stronghold laid waste with his own eyes.

A green bulb lights up beside him. Pressure seals secure.

He enters his command code onto an oversized keypad. The hatch above unlocks with a snap of vulcanised seals and durasteel locking bars. It slides back and Ventanus pushes himself upright.

Flames surround the tank as it bludgeons its way through the outer reaches of Foedral Fell's defences. Bands of brotherhood warriors in scavenged exo-suits run from the Shadowsword. None of their weapons are capable of denting its thick armour, and they know it.

Banks of heavy bolters mow them down as they flee. Streams of las and solid rounds saw through their disordered ranks. Plumes of hot blood puff from their exploding bodies like geothermal geysers.

Ventanus slews the pintle-mounted combi-bolter around and hauls back on the arming lever. The magazine engages with a satisfying clatter and he mashes the trigger. The recoil of a combi-bolter is ferocious, more suited to the man-capable tanks that are Terminators, but the Shadowsword's assembly and his genhanced strength keep his rounds on target.

Bodies detonate, reduced to meat and gristle.

Here and there a warrior band holds its ground. Ventanus has brief glimpses of iron masks, ragged robes and wholly inadequate rad-shielding. They fire weapons that are sub-Army in quality and effectiveness. He wonders how such rabble ever gained a foothold on Calth. He kills them as soon as he sees them.

There are no Word Bearers amongst the cultists, but everything he saw of the fighting before the retreat below ground displayed total disregard for their mortal allies. The humans are here only to slow the Ultramarines' advance, to soak up their fury. If that is Fell's plan, then he has sorely

underestimated the well of fury from which the XIII Legion can draw.

Ventanus savours the sight of hundreds of Ultramarines tanks thundering over the hellish wasteland of Fell's outer fortifications. To either side of him, Land Raiders rear up over hastily-raised berms of scorched earth, slamming back down with thunderous force. The enemy warriors who have held their ground are crushed beneath their tracks or buried in the dust. Squadrons of Predators fire syncopated volleys of heavy las-fire and the fiery contrails of Whirlwind missiles arc overhead in dizzying numbers.

Squadron upon squadron of Land Speeders flit like murderous raptors over the battlefield, strafing exposed enemy formations. Their multi-meltas breach bunkers, and Assault squads drop in their wake to end pockets of resistance with shrieking chain-blades and pistols.

The *Burning Cloud* strides in from the east, its guns wreathed in smoke and light as it sears the sky with magma blasts. Mushrooming explosions erupt in the centre of the fortifications. Adamantium walls are turned to slag with each impact. Air-bursting rockets flare from the Titan's void shields, and its warhorn sounds like booming laughter.

Ventanus brings a tactical overlay onto his visor. Gold icons close like a fist on Fell's fortification, but these are just the outer layers. Easily overcome. The real defences are a kilometre ahead, towering walls that can withstand a Titan's guns, hellish bastions of dark steel and sunken bunker complexes that even a Shadowsword will struggle to breach.

But he has bigger guns than even a Reaver or a Shadowsword can mount.

Ventanus opens a vox-channel to Arcology X.

'Meer Edv Tawren,' he says. 'Just like before.'

XXII

Tawren links with the orbital guns and disengages their safety protocols with an outward sweep of both hands, like an actor parting a curtain and taking the stage. It takes a moment for the multiple layers of security put in place since the invasion to disengage, but each platform comes under her command without issue.

Every orbital gun is now slaved to Arcology X.

She has control.

'Brace for full bombardment,' says Tawren.

XXIII

For a single, beautiful moment, Calth's night ends.

The poisoned air lights up. Daylight returns.

But it is a false dawn, heralding not the promise of fresh beginnings, only endings.

The undersides of clouds heavy with acid rain glow for an instant as high powered lasers burn through them. Meson trails flash-burn the volatile, chemically-rich bands of vapour that have gathered above the strongpoint. The landscape is lit up for hundreds of kilometres as the sky catches fire.

All of this happens in an instant. Fractions of seconds later, searing beams of energy slice down from space like arrow-straight lightning. The beams make no sound in themselves, but the atmosphere ignites with their passage. Each impact is swiftly followed by a hard bang of displaced air.

Ventanus watches it through the filtering insulation of his armour's auto-senses. Aural dampers

resist deafening cracks of thunder that would otherwise rupture his eardrums. Visual protection keeps him from being blinded. Ceramite plates protect him from heat that would sear the flesh from his bones.

The exposed cultists have no such protection and their formations are reduced to swirling banks of meat-smoke. Skeletons have the flesh burned from them, blood boils and impregnable walls are left as little more than heaped rubble.

The first wave of overpressure hits and the ground quakes. The Shadowsword rocks back on its suspension as the percussive blast slams into it like an army of Contemptors slamming its hull with graviton hammers. Ventanus leans into the blast wave, riding out the pummelling force. His link with the super-heavy tells him that numerous onboard systems have failed. Feed lines rupture, hydraulics burst and delicate systems overload.

A kilometre from the nearest impact point, and still they are too close.

Laser lances and kinetic rounds all slam down on Foedral Fell's stronghold, blowing out its pathetic blast shielding and rudimentary void fields. There is nothing left of the fortifications. Its soft underbelly has been exposed and Ventanus has the harpoon ready to thrust.

Excited chatter bursts over the vox. A hundred voices all saying the same thing.

'Did you see that?'

'Throne!'

'There can't be anything left alive in there!'

Ventanus knows there will be survivors. The Word Bearers will not be dug out so easily.

He cuts across the vox-network.

'We still have a practical to achieve,' he says. 'Carry out your orders.'

The Ultramarines obey.

XXIV

Hol Beloth watches in horror as the horizon lights up from end to end. He knows what he is seeing, a holocaust of orbital fire concentrated in one place. He has memorised the geography of Calth and knows exactly who the wrath of the Ultramarines guns is striking.

'Fell,' he says.

Maloq Kartho nods.

Hot winds whip around the headless tower, billowing Hol Beloth's cloak and filling his mouth with grey grit. The swaying motion of the tower forces him to keep his stance wide as the ground tilts alarmingly below him. He feels as though he stands upon the deck of a primitive longship. The sensation is not a welcome one.

The devastation of Calth is even more apparent from up here. It is a radiation-lashed death world that will always bear the mark of the Word Bearers. Despite what he is seeing, he takes a moment of pride in that fact, even as his own skin blisters.

More impacts slam into the ground, more fire lights the horizon. The first seismic shocks shake the tower. Glass fragments rain from gaping frames. Structural supports buckle and tumble earthwards. The tower slumps into its splitting foundations.

Collimated lance battery fire strikes the horizon. The hellish radiance it provides illuminates one stark fact.

'You knew this was coming,' says Hol Beloth.

Kartho shrugs and Hol Beloth hates the gesture. It is a gesture of giving up, of not feeling enough to care that something precious is dying. That shrug tells him that Maloq Kartho is no longer truly one of Lorgar's sons, but is becoming something else entirely.

'Fell had the biggest army,' says Kartho, 'and the grandest ambition.'

Hol Beloth tries not to feel slighted, knowing it is absurd in the face of such destruction. He tries to follow Kartho's words to a logical conclusion, but those he reaches make no sense. Only one factor remains constant in his thoughts.

'You engineered this, didn't you?' he says.

'Of course,' replies Kartho.

'Fell and his warriors are gone, aren't they?'

'Not yet,' replies Kartho, struggling with the gorget seals at his neck. 'But soon.'

'Why?' asks Hol Beloth, knowing now that he will have to kill the Dark Apostle. Kartho has crossed a line, though for what purpose, he does not know.

'Service to the Dark Monarchs requires a degree of sacrifice,' says Kartho. 'And the Ultramarines needed a target tempting enough to draw them from their cowardly bolthole.'

Kartho reaches up and removes his helmet. More accurately, he snaps his helmet apart in order to remove it. Zephyrs of dark smoke gust from within and Hol Beloth sees just how far the Dark Apostle has come in his service to Lorgar's vision for the galaxy.

XXV

An electromagnetic haze hangs over the landscape. Dust swirls like ashen rain and heat blooms ripple the air over terrain that has been boiled to glass by the heat of multiple lance strikes. The Shadowsword crunches through the shattered remains of Foedral Fell's strongpoint. The orbital weapons have destroyed his sheltering walls with horrifying ease.

Ventanus climbs down from the Shadowsword. Its hull is hot to the touch and the reactor ticks over noisily as it cools. Shapes move in the mist, but they are armoured in cobalt-blue and gold. They are Ultramarines, and they are marching alongside him.

His armour's external pickups register a wide spectrum of exotic radiations and a lethal cocktail of poisonous elements in the air. This is only to be expected when such potent energies have been unleashed. Staggered lines of Legion warriors advance into the molten remnants of the enemy fortress, boltguns locked to their shoulders. They are blurred giants moving through a chemical fog that would dissolve the lungs of a mortal man with one breath.

Ventanus has his bolt pistol drawn and his sword unsheathed. He does not expect to use either in the immediate future, but a captain must be seen to be ready to fight. He sees no sign of the Word Bearers, but he knows that they will be here somewhere. They are Legion trained and Legion blooded. They will have survived this bombardment and will even now be readying a counter-attack.

Ventanus leads the Ultramarines deeper into the smoking, debris strewn wasteland. The Shadowsword rolls behind him, its engine a bone-deep rumble that he feels in his marrow. As the circle of Ultramarines tightens on the stronghold's centre, a nagging suspicion takes shape in Ventanus's head. Nebulous and unformed, but insistent.

Scattered groups of brotherhood soldiers have miraculously survived the barrage. They are blind and deaf, burned and desolate. They are slaughtered without mercy. The Ultramarines do not waste mass-reactives on them. Who knows when they will be resupplied? Chain-blades and fists put the

enemy down, but there is little satisfaction in such wretched targets.

'This is Ventanus,' he voxes to his force commanders. 'Report any sightings of enemy Legion forces.'

There are no reports of contacts beyond the scalded, crippled forms of the enemy's mortal soldiery, and Ventanus feels a gnawing worry that something here is very wrong.

'Where are the Word Bearers?' he asks himself.

If Foedral Fell is not here, then where is he?

At the heart of the fortress the Ultramarines find a vast crater, a nightmarish hell of electrical fires and scorched meat. Almost nothing is left standing, and what the barrage did not level in the opening moments, secondary explosions and burning ammunition depots have knocked flat. Here and there, Ventanus sees evidence of retrenchments and redoubts, but it is hard to make out anything for sure any more. Tawren's precision strikes have seen to that.

The Shadowsword's main gun traverses over his head, searching for a target, but finding nothing worthy of its fire. The *Burning Cloud* is silhouetted in the flames, a great engine of destruction standing over the doom of its foe.

A dust- and grime-coated warrior emerges from the haze and raises a hand.

'I thought there'd be at least someone left alive to fight,' says Sydance.

'So did I,' replies Ventanus, sheathing his sword and mag-locking his pistol to his thigh.

'You think they died in the bombardment?'

'It looks that way,' says Ventanus, though it seems too convenient an explanation.

'Not much of a fortress then,' says Sydance. 'Lord Dorn would have words.'

Ventanus says nothing in reply, his friend's words striking at the nagging suspicion that has been building ever since the first shots were fired. He stops in his tracks as his thoughts cohere on an inherent flaw in what has happened here.

'This fortress could never have stood,' he says. 'It's completely ridiculous.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Why build anything we could level from orbit in moments?' says Ventanus. 'Why build it above ground at all? It doesn't make any sense.'

'Maybe they couldn't find anywhere underground?'

'They could have found *somewhere* to get underground,' says Ventanus. 'This isn't making any sense. Damn it, what are we missing?'

The winds are clearing the smoke and haze, and Ventanus has something of an answer when he sees the cracked structure at the very heart of the fortress. Like the hardened structure of an aircraft hangar, it has withstood the barrage enough to remain standing. Sections of its roof have caved in where the supporting walls have collapsed. Ventanus can see no defensive works in its construction.

It is a giant dome, embellished with elaborate carvings, a pair of decorative towers and a wide entrance without gates. Its construction is grandiose and Ventanus realises he has seen its like before.

'What do you think that is?' asks Sydance. 'A keep? Somewhere to make a last stand?'

'No,' says Ventanus. 'It's not a keep, but I know what it is now. I've seen buildings like this before.'

'Where?'

'On Monarchia,' says Ventanus. 'It's a temple.'

Ingenium Subiaco does not remember falling asleep, but that is surely what has happened.

It is understandable. Toiling in perpetual twilight, with no rest in the darkness and no respite from the task in hand, no one could remain awake for as long as he has. He is dreaming, of that he is sure, for he travels the same silvered caves of his nightmares.

He has come here night after night, dragged down into horrors that play out in an endless loop. That the experience never changes offers no respite, only dark foreknowledge of the nightmarish flight from the multi-jointed creatures with the polished steel claws that *tap*, *tap*, *tap* upon the rock.

The cave is the same strange silver, glistening with moisture and with the now omnipresent threat lurking just out of sight. He knows the apparently solid walls of the cave are nothing of the sort. He knows what lurks behind the fragile skin of reality and, as much as he wishes to, he cannot *unknow* it.

Half-glimpsed forms flit around him like darting smoke.

He moves through the caves hurriedly, expecting that at any moment the walls will start peeling back to reveal the corruption beneath. He hears voices, but they are meaningless to him and he cannot answer them. At every step he feels as though he is being guided, but by who or what, he cannot say.

The sense of expectation is almost unendurable, like a guillotine blade suspended a hair's breadth over the back of his neck. Subiaco wills himself to wake, but he has long since learned that he is powerless to control the inevitable progression of this terror.

Sure enough, he hears the faint sound of tapping, like rats in the walls.

Tap, *tap*, *tap*...

Subiaco breaks into a run as he hears the clack of claws again and again.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap...

Louder now, coming from all around him. This is new, this is his nightmare moving to a higher level of terror. Then, as though a flame has been taken to the papier-mâché backing of the walls, they begin to disintegrate, blackening and spiralling away like dying embers. The walls slough from the familiar rusted lattice supporting them and the terrible void behind is revealed once again.

It churns like the depths of a hideously polluted ocean, saturated with the filth and mire of an entire species. What is in there is not alien. It is not the horrific by-product of some race inimical to mankind. With unasked-for clarity he understands that this ocean of madness belongs to *his* people. Humanity creates this realm of insanity, and Subiaco runs as he hears the claws of his daemonic pursuers tearing their way through once more.

This time they are not just behind him. They are all around him.

The wall ahead of him bulges as *something* presses its unnatural bulk against the lath, and Subiaco sees gleaming fangs and amber eyes, each slitted with a dagger slash of onyx. The tear splits wider and a brood of beasts with claws of polished steel spill into the hollow cavern. Their blades gleam with murder and their flesh is fashioned from the skinless bodies of everyone he knows and loves. Screaming faces howl in torment from heaving, animal flanks, and their limbs are the beasts' limbs, fused together in some awful biological abortion. The skulls of the beasts are metallic, gleaming wetly through pasted-on skin. Even stretched out he recognises the faces there, and his scream is one of abject loss.

Subiaco runs, and the beasts are hard on his heels, stalking him, toying with him.

They could catch and kill him any time they want, but there is too much pleasure to be taken in the hunt. He feels their hot breath upon him, rancid and empty.

Subiaco knows there is only one way out and he races onwards, hoping with every breathless stride that he will reach the great cyclopean gateway with its golden seal.

Only the gateway offers sanctuary.

Subiaco wakes, the cries of the daemons ringing in his ears.

And nothing has changed.

XXVII

The interior of the temple is a slaughterhouse, and Ventanus can make no sense of it.

It is cold inside, freezing even. The heat from the dying star and the bombardment does not penetrate here, and steam rises from every legionary's backpack. Columns of light stab down from the cracked roof and the poisonous fumes of burning war materiel linger at the openings in the wall, as though unwilling to enter.

Ventanus smelled the blood before he took one step within, and now he has an answer as to what has become of the Word Bearers.

They are in the temple and they are all dead.

Their bodies are arranged in what is clearly a pattern, each one apparently still standing.

This is an illusion created by the fact that each enemy legionary is held upright by a sharpened spar of blackened iron. Several thousand Word Bearers have been impaled here, their bodies arranged in a form that clearly has some significance. What that might be is a mystery to Ventanus.

Eikos Lamiad and Kiuz Selaton lead their warriors through the columns of dead Word Bearers. Selaton carries the Fourth Company standard, that glorious, dented reminder of all they have lost and all they fight to keep.

The Contemptor, Telemechrus, keeps pace with Lamiad, as though he is the tetrarch's personal bodyguard. The spinning barrels of his assault cannon whine as the weapon sweeps left and right in search of a living target.

Sydance stays at Ventanus's side. His expression is unreadable behind his helm's visor, but his body language is unambiguous.

'Who did this?' he asks. He doesn't understand yet, but Ventanus does.

'They did it to themselves.'

Sydance's head snaps around. Ventanus does't know whether the other captain is more horrified at the idea of warriors doing this to themselves or that Ventanus has understanding enough to know it. He shakes his head and moves on. Nearly a thousand Ultramarines stand within the temple, shocked beyond words at this latest atrocity. None of them can make sense of what they are seeing. It is too alien to their understanding and fits no model of war they have been taught.

Ventanus approaches the nearest Word Bearer and lifts his head. The dead man wears no helmet and his face has been cut open with hard slashes from a sharp blade. His features are contorted with a mixture of horror and devotion. The symbols are oddly geometric and unpleasant to look at in ways beyond the obvious.

The pattern of impaled bodies becomes clearer the closer Ventanus gets to the centre of the temple. The groups of Ultramarines are naturally funnelled together as they approach the middle of the vaulted chamber. Ventanus feels the temperature drop still further.

'They are arranged in equidistant columns,' says Lamiad, his half flesh, half cracked ceramic face managing to convey the disgust they all feel. 'They radiate outwards from a central point.'

'Suggesting that what's at the centre is important,' says Ventanus.

'A fane's nave is designed to lead to a central altar,' agrees Lamiad. 'The place of worship.'

'Worship?' Sydance spits the word. 'I thought we'd cured them of that half a century ago.'

‘Clearly the lesson did not take,’ says Lamiad, gesturing with his one good arm to the sacrificial massacre around them. The limb he lost early in the conflict could be restored, his face repaired. The technology and the craftsmen required are available, but Lamiad has chosen to remain as he is. His mythology has become important to Calth and it is a sacrifice he bears willingly.

Ventanus has the utmost admiration for Eikos Lamiad, and hopes he will be as strong as the tetrarch when the time comes for him to make such a sacrifice.

‘So what’s at the centre?’ asks Selaton, holding the standard at his side. ‘I don’t see an altar.’

Selaton is right. There is no altar, merely a sunken pit, from which issue tendrils of drifting mist. Ventanus leads the way, his fingers closing over the hilt of his sword. Everyone here is already dead, but the reassurance of a weapon in his hand is always welcome.

As Ventanus approaches the pit, he sees that it goes down for three metres, and at its centre is another impaled body. A Word Bearer, one clad in crimson armour bedecked with fluttering oath paper and stamped with golden scriptwork.

This is no line warrior. Every plate and edge has been crafted by hand, shaped by a master artificer and polished with the devotion that only a high-ranking war leader could earn.

The parchment-white face is that of a cannibal ghoul, a lipless horror of gaunt cheekbones, sunken eyes and a hairless scalp. More of the geometric symbols have been cut into the bone of his exposed skull where the skin has been peeled away. A ragged hole has been smashed through into the empty void of his brainpan.

‘Foedral Fell, I presume,’ says Ventanus.

Bodies are heaped around Fell’s corpse: cultist warriors, their bodies cut open and emptied. They are staged in poses of devotion, arms chained to the spike-topped staff upon which Fell is impaled, mouths slack with praise, eyes stitched open in adoration.

‘What’s that he’s stuck with?’ asks Selaton. ‘It’s different from the others. That symbol...’

‘I saw the same thing over and over again,’ says Sydance. ‘I’d always thought it was some kind of unit marking. A load of the rabble we broke through to get to you at Numinus carried staves just like it.’

‘No,’ says Eikos Lamiad. ‘It is not a unit marking, not as we understand it. It is a totem, an icon of their new masters. As we still carry the aquila, our enemies now carry this. They call it the Octed.’

Ventanus feels a spasm of revulsion at the word. He looks at the staff, its thick, inscribed haft and eight radiating spoke blades mirroring the arrangement of the dead Word Bearers. He has seen enemy champions carrying this symbol before them, brandishing it like a holy relic.

‘We should get out of here,’ says Ventanus. ‘Let Tawren’s guns level this place.’

Foedral Fell’s head snaps up and his lipless sneer pulls tight over his skull.

‘*Guns won’t save you now,*’ says a bleak voice that tears from the corpse before a froth of tar-black fluid vomits from its mouth onto the corpses at its feet. ‘*The Neverborn are coming for you all...*’

The Ultramarines step back from the pit, revolted and shocked. Foedral Fell’s body spasms – a series of bone-snapping convulsions that would surely have killed him had any life remained in him. The Word Bearer dances in his impalement as a tidal wave of black bilious fluid, noxious and viscous, continues to pour from his mouth.

It is an impossible amount, more than a body could possibly contain. It squirts from his eyes and ears. It flows from his nose and jets from his mouth like a pressurised hose. The pit fills with piceous fluid, a seething cesspool of the darkest corruption. Foedral Fell’s skull is now fully submerged, but Ventanus can still hear his gleeful mantra.

The Neverborn are coming...

The Neverborn are coming...

Only the bladed finial of the Octed staff remains above the oily liquid. Inky smoke coils from its spiked tips. Ropes of it writhe like mating serpents, spreading overhead like a veil of shadows, reaching out to the impaled corpses spread throughout the fane.

'Back!' cries Ventanus, now understanding that they have been lured into a trap; the very doctrines that saved them from destruction now turned against them. 'Get to your vehicles and withdraw. Go! Now!'

The pit bubbles over, the protoplasmic black ooze spreading over the bloody ground like an unstopped oil well. Bubbles of unnatural matter form and burst, carrying the stink of the charnel house and the buzz of a million corpse-eating flies.

The Neverborn are coming...

The Ultramarines retreat in good order from the growing pool of darkness at the heart of the chamber. A miasma of black smoke fills the temple, the vile breath of corrupt and daemonic gods.

The Neverborn are coming for you all...

And the dead warriors of Foedral Fell open eyes of blackest night.

XXVIII

Hol Beloth steps away from the Dark Apostle as he sees the curling horn was not some ornamentation wrought upon his helm, but a part of Maloq Kartho's skull. The ridged appendage of bone extrudes from a swollen mass of necrotised tissue, veined with blood and coated with sticky, foul-smelling fluid.

Nor is that the only change in Maloq Kartho's appearance.

His skin has taken on a rugose quality and his eyes are now opaque orbs of sickly orange.

'Do you know Sorot Tchure?' asks Kartho, his mouth a rip across a yellow skull. His lips are bloody where serrated, triangular teeth have torn them. 'He understands many of the hidden truths of the universe, not at least of which is the power of betrayal. He knows something of the potency of its impact in the immaterial realm. To betray a friend is one thing, a trusted friend even more so. He took that lesson to heart when he began this.'

Hol Beloth had heard the name, a whisper of one destined for great things.

'But Lord Aurelian taught me that to betray a *brother*... ah, now that holds the greatest power of all,' continues Kartho. 'Their screams were like the Phoenician's sweetest wine, their blood a baptism richer than any rained down by Angron himself. Fell was the greatest prize, a warrior whose dreams were on the very cusp of being realised when they were snatched away. Such towering desire unmade and dashed before his very eyes...'

Kartho gurgles with laughter at the memory.

Hol Beloth's hand slides around the grip of his sword.

'Fell is gone,' says Kartho, 'but you can still claim what he desired.'

'Why should I trust you?'

'Because you have no choice,' says Kartho, pointing towards the horizon with a hand that looks a lot less like a hand with every passing moment.

'Watch the melodrama of the universe at play,' says Kartho as a darkly radiant light erupts on the horizon. Hol Beloth lifts a gauntlet to shield himself from the new sun that boils up in a mushrooming cloud of atomic fire. He knows where that sun has touched down and scorched the world to glass.

‘What have you done?’ he gasps.

The Dark Apostle does not answer, dropping to one knee and gasping in dark rapture.

‘What have you done?’ demands Hol Beloth again.

‘The old beliefs pass away, and a great light shows us the way,’ says Kartho, looking up at him with a predatory grin as he quotes from the Book of Lorgar. ‘Now brace yourself.’

Horrified, Hol Beloth can only shake his head.

‘For what?’ he asks.

‘A fall.’

XXIX

The conference chamber of the Ultimus is a hair’s breadth from panic. There was no warning, no hint of yet another disaster, but when it came it was as sudden and shocking as the moment the Word Bearers first opened fire.

Another underground shelter is gone, transformed into a seething atomic cauldron of death. Even without the geo-sats, Arcology X’s surface augurs are more than able to read the unimaginable spike of radioactive energy from the west. Picters and rad-counters combine their data on the plotting table, and Tawren watches as the towering pyrocumulus of fire-lit smoke takes shape on the western horizon.

‘*The Emperor protects*,’ weeps Captain Ullyet, clutching at something hung around his neck. ‘*He is the Light and the Way*.’

‘We just lost another one, didn’t we?’ says Hamadri, gripping the edge of the plotter tightly as the first shockwaves transmitted through the lithosphere shake the walls of the Ultimus.

Tawren nods, too busy sifting the myriad inloads from her linked surveyors and augurs. Orbital scans combine with surface readings to build a more complete picture of what they have just lost.

A bone-deep rumble fills the room as the surface of Calth is wrenched and torn by the force of what Tawren now understands is a subterranean detonation powerful enough to have ripped its way to the surface. These are just the first shockwaves racing from the blast; there will be worse to come.

‘Which one?’ asks Ullyet, the steel in his voice unwavering as dust and shards of ceiling tiles fall to the floor in a clatter of stone fragments. ‘Magnesi? Gabrinius? Which one, damn it?’

His lapse into catechism has passed and he is barking orders like a soldier again.

‘Triangulating now,’ says Tawren.

The image of the atomic storm cloud fades from the plotter and a base-level topographical map of Calth’s surface takes its place. Data coheres, readings correlate. An icon to the west begins to blink furiously.

Hamadri and Ullyet look up in puzzlement, but Tawren is just as surprised.

‘Uranik Radial,’ she says, as though not yet ready to believe her own incontrovertible data conclusion. ‘It’s gone. Destroyed.’

‘But...’ begins Ullyet.

‘That’s Hol Beloth,’ finishes Hamadri as the main blast wave hits Arcology X.

XXX

They haul themselves from the spikes impaling them to the ground. Armour splits, dead flesh tears.

Ventanus doesn't see any blood pour from the huge holes in their bodies. Any fluid left in them has long since curdled in their veins. They move stiffly, as though they have forgotten how to walk.

Or they're just learning.

The Neverborn. Ventanus does not know the term, but he immediately understands its substance. These are the fleshless horrors the Word Bearers brought forth from the warp. Nightmarish xenos *things* from a dimension shut away from the eyes of humanity for good reason. They look out from dead men's skulls and he feels their insatiable hunger.

He doesn't need to issue an order. The horror of the situation demands individual response.

Bolter fire rips through the reanimated Word Bearers, each one bleeding black smoke from the exploded meat of their bodies. Wounds sufficient to put down two legionaries barely slow them. They come on with limbs hanging off, bones shattered.

The warriors in red crash against the warriors in blue, all adaption complete. These are no sluggish revenants, but warriors as strong and fast in death as they were in life. The numbers are nothing like even, but the daemon things squatting in the Word Bearers' skulls do not take up their hosts' weapons to fight. Claws and teeth are their killing tools, not guns. An eternity of war in a timeless dimension has seen to that.

It is the only advantage the Ultramarines have.

Ventanus shoots with pinpoint accuracy. None of his shots are wasted.

Kill shots to the head every time.

Inside every skull a squalling mass of shrieking darkness, solid and gelatinous. A daemonic parasite taken up residence in the body of a dead man that vanishes in a screaming implosion of displaced matter. He shoots until the hammer strikes an empty chamber, ejects the magazine and reloads with a fluid economy of motion. He shoots until his last magazine is expended and then draws his power sword.

The Neverborn throw themselves at him, driven by desperate hunger and loathing. Ventanus sees the hatred in their dead eyes and does not know what he has done to earn it. His sword cuts through armour made heavy without power. Kinetic shock travels up his arm with every blow, but he is energised and ready for this fight.

He came here to kill Word Bearers and, *damn it*, that is what he will do.

The Neverborn are not silent. They scream as they claw at the Ultramarines and they shriek as they die. Their cries are tormented, but Ventanus has no pity left in him. Not for himself and certainly not for the Word Bearers.

Strobing flashes of gunfire light the dark umbra spreading overhead.

Ventanus and Sydance fight back to back. Both have exhausted their stock of ammunition.

'A few more than twelve this time,' grunts Sydance as he hacks his chainsword down through a Word Bearer's collarbone and sternum with a two-handed grip.

'You mean thirteen,' says Ventanus.

'No, only ever twelve,' replies Sydance with a grin.

Ventanus understands that grin.

They are brothers and they are equals, and there is a purity to this fight. There are no lofty ideals at stake, no grand strategy in play. It is simple life or death, and there is something to be said for such simplicity.

Ventanus cuts heads from shoulders, opens chests and hacks legs from hips. His blade is always in motion. He employs every move he knows to stay alive; those learned from the blademasters of Macragge and those picked up in a lifetime of desperate brawls in almost two hundred years of war.

Telemechrus slaughters the Word Bearers by the dozen. His assault cannon shreds bodies into their constituent atoms and renders even a corpse warrior unable to fight. They claw at his body, beating broken fists to pulp against his casket. The Contemptor relishes this melee, fighting alongside Eikos of the Arm and his Shield Bearers.

The Tetrarch of Konor is no less lethal with only the one fighting limb. He has fired his pistol empty and kills with the precise strokes of a master fencer. He too has learned the lesson that the only way to put the enemy down for good is to make the decapitating strike.

Selaton and his squads are carrying the banner towards the arched portal through which they entered. He is not withdrawing, he is clearing a corridor for the rest of them to use.

Ventanus shouts the order to fall back.

Something huge and crimson slams into him, knocking him to the ground. He rolls as an armoured boot slams down. He swings his sword for the warrior's centre-mass, but the blade clashes against the bladed Octed finial of a rune-inscribed staff.

'*Death has come to you*,' says Foedral Fell, still skewered.

'Death will come when I'm good and ready,' answers Ventanus.

XXXI

The world spins. Up becomes down and the ground falls away from Hol Beloth.

The starscraper, already on the brink of collapse, needed only a nudge to come crashing down. The blast wave from the cyclonic warhead's detonation at Uranik Radial shatters what uneasy arrangement of vectors still holds it erect. Its foundations break apart and the structural members at its base buckle like wire in the face of the pounding shockwave.

Ten floors collapse in an instant, blown away like dust in a hurricane.

The building slumps, its own weight crushing it and dragging it down.

Hol Beloth grabs onto an exposed rebar, but it won't be enough to save him. His stomach lurches and he feels momentarily weightless. He hears Kartho's crazed laughter over the crescendo of shattering steel and exploding permacrete. Floor slabs snap like tinder and plasteel stanchions capable of holding up a building kilometres high unravel like twine.

Debris cascades around him, battering him and threatening to tear him from his handhold. The building itself wants to murder him, but he won't let it. Hol Beloth has to stay alive long enough to kill Maloq Kartho.

The sky falls away. Through a break in the flooring slab that was once over a thousand metres above ground, he sees the surface of the world opening up.

Wide chasms rip jagged traceries through Lanshear's outskirts. Hair-fine fault lines tear open and abyssal canyons gape like gateways to the underworld. Vast clouds of dust and smoke jet into the sky in a cloud to match that above the fiery crater that once housed his army.

Hol Beloth can see nothing of the world around him.

Everything is noise and fire, dust and impacts.

Then he hits the ground. The starscraper doesn't stop.

Metres-thick columns smash through the surface of Calth like piledrivers slammed down by an angry god. The starscraper's colossal mass and momentum plunge it through the rock like a sword thrust. Hundreds of metres down, previously unknown cave voids are broken into. Unconnected galleries and sinkholes appearing on no map are suddenly open to the sky.

Hol Beloth sees nothing of this. Hundreds of thousands of metric tonnes cascade down into the revealed cave systems. He is a speck of mortal flesh in a hurricane of aeons-old rock. The plates of his armour shatter like glass. Bones break and he feels the shock of furnace heat as his biological repair mechanisms fight to keep him alive.

He loses his grip on the rebar and drops through a storm of bludgeoning rock.

He falls, spinning downwards from impact to impact. Blood fills his helmet, threatening to drown him. He slams into a rock wall and it is torn away. He cannot see anything but darkness and a blitzing torrent of debris. Steel and glass fall with him in a shimmering rain.

Over the unending fury of deafening noise, Hol Beloth still hears the maddening laughter of the Dark Apostle.

At last his fall ends.

His broken body plunges into an icy lake of dark water. It is deep and the fortunate angle of impact means he only breaks six of his ribs and not his spinal column. Freezing water enfolds him, pouring down his throat and into his lungs. He gags and coughs, the deep cold shocking him from the disorientation of his fall.

Autonomic responses take over. His throat seals his primary lungs off. Implanted breathing organs alongside his genhanced ones take over. They siphon what little air is left in them and shunt that oxygen directly to his brain. Electrochemical shocks throughout his body jolt him into life, self-induced fibrillation to get his limbs working again.

Hol Beloth thrashes uselessly. He has no buoyancy, his armour is dragging him down.

Legionary armour is airtight and therefore watertight, but his has been broken open and shattered. Water rushes to fill it and the weight is enormous. He struggles to fight its sucking ballast, but his body is too badly hurt, his soul too grievously broken.

Hol Beloth sinks deeper, a stream of bubbles spuming from his lips.

An arm plunges into the water and a clawed hand grips the broken edge of his pauldron. It is bestial and scaled. Yellowed talons score deep grooves in the ceramite as he is dragged back to the surface.

Hol Beloth is hauled onto a shore of debris and rubble, gasping for breath. He rolls and vomits twin lungfuls of water so cold it burns his throat. He retches until his body is empty of fluid, tasting blood and bile in his mouth. He feels the intramuscular sphincters of his airways switch as he shifts back to his regular breathing pattern.

Cold air has never tasted so good.

Steam rises from his body, his skin hot to the touch. His incredible physiology is repairing damage that should have killed him outright. That he is alive at all is a miracle, and he looks up to see just how far he has fallen. Dust fogs the air and a rain of debris tumbles into the cave from the jagged tear in its ceiling. Latticed steelwork from the collapsed starscraper webs the opening torn in the rock like crude stitches, and sparking lengths of high-tensile wire and data cabling dangle like jungle creepers.

The gloom makes it hard to judge the cave's dimensions, but it is not large. Perhaps a hundred metres at its widest. The water level of the lake is rising as more debris falls into it.

Maloq Kartho squats at the edge of the lake, impossibly unscathed by their fall. Icewater laps at his feet. Hol Beloth sees there is something wrong with the Dark Apostle. Darkness clings to the warrior, but it looks like there are too many joints in his legs.

Kartho turns his horned head and says, 'You live,' as though he is surprised.

'You destroyed my army,' says Hol Beloth.

Kartho nods. 'Rabble,' he says. 'Fodder. A meat price.'

‘Why?’

‘You had no need of them,’ says Kartho. ‘You have a higher purpose than marching at the head of debased mortals.’

‘What purpose?’ asks Hol Beloth, hating that he cannot hide his urgent desire.

The Dark Apostle cocks his head to one side, as though the answer is self-evident, but furnishes him with no reply. He looks towards the broken ceiling of the cave, expectant.

‘And though the heavens rain fire upon the Bearers of the Truth, yet shall there be a greater boon given unto them,’ says Kartho, pulling himself erect. He is taller now, his body swelling with vitality. The Dark Apostle is on the verge of something incredible, a trans-formation or an ascension. Darkness seethes within him, a dangerous energy only kept in check by a monumental effort of will.

The coming hours will either transform Kartho or destroy him.

Hol Beloth does not know which he would rather see.

XXXII

Ventanus raises his sword in a two-handed block as Foedral Fell – or whatever dark force is animating his body – swings a toothed falchion in a diagonal cut. The force behind the blow is enormous. Energised sparks spray from the impact of the blades, and ozone stink fills his nostrils as the servos of his battle armour augment his strength. He rolls his wrists, letting the roaring teeth scrape down his power sword.

He sways aside from a blindingly swift return stroke and thrusts for Fell’s groin. It is a good strike, powerful and well-aimed. The point lances the crimped joint between Fell’s pelvis and thigh.

Ventanus twists, and wrenches the blade clear.

Black blood spills out. The stench is awful. The worst thing in the world. Even the filters of his helm cannot keep it out. He gags, retching dryly.

The blood stops flowing and Fell is not even slowed.

‘*You kill my kin*,’ says the Neverborn, a froth of disintegrating matter spilling over its lips.

Ventanus does not answer and attacks again.

They trade blows back and forth, and though his skill is the greater, the speed and strength of his opponent is phenomenal. Three times he avoids death by the narrowest margin. He hears his name called, but can’t spare a moment’s concentration to see who is shouting to him.

The sound of gunfire is a distant echo. The flash of mass-reactive detonations barely registers. He is in the middle of furious battle, but all he sees is the daemon creature trying to kill him. Fell still has the Octed staff piercing him, though it has snapped inside his body. Only the top half remains.

Two warriors in cobalt-blue and gold appear beside Ventanus. One has a face of broken porcelain and flesh, the other is in the battle colours of a Fourth Company captain. He knows them and loves them as brothers. Eikos Lamiad fights with economical grace, Lyros Sydance with vengeful fury. His brother captain was always a man given to passionate rages, most of which needed tempering, but Ventanus is grateful for this one.

To face a single Ultramarine is daunting. Three is certain death.

Foedral Fell laughs in their faces. His falchion is a blur, blocking, parrying and attacking with a speed that should be impossible. Liquid black fire leaps along the length of his blade and where it touches it burns Legion plate like dry wood.

‘*The Saviour, the Lancer and the Cripple...*’ giggles Fell, spinning and slamming an elbow into

Lamiad's cheek. Facial plates crack further. '*The warp knows you...*'

'Bastard!' cries Sydance, lunging forward. His sword cuts down through Fell's left arm. A spray of the foul blood washes out, along with a host of wriggling things, segmented and waving like worms. Corpse feeders. Sydance gags on the stench and Fell's falchion sweeps up to take his head.

Ventanus blocks the blow and hammers his boot into Fell's gut. The Word Bearer staggers under the force of it, the bladed finials of the staff reflecting the light of gunfire. Something fast moving and powerful strikes it – a rogue shell or a ricochet.

The daemonic face behind Fell's eyes shudders. Pain wracks its body and a gout of boiling black fluid jets from its mouth. It staggers and Ventanus sees his opening. He spins inside Fell's guard and rams his sword through his breastplate.

Lightning streams the length of the blade as it punches through ceramite, flesh, bone and the stuff of night. The tip breaks through the backplate of Fell's armour, but the metal of the blade has aged a thousand years.

Silvered steel is now corroded rust that flakes to ash within moments of exposure to the real world.

A pistoning fist slams Ventanus back as he hears his name being shouted again. He hits the ground hard and tries to rise. Something is holding him down.

Eikos Lamiad, his face a horror of ruined flesh where his mask has been shattered, has him pinned to the ground.

'Tetrarch!' shouts Ventanus. 'What–'

Lamiad shakes his head as a towering shadow falls over them.

A giant in tar-slicked ceramite. A titan who fell from the skies and lived to tell of it. One arm is a crushing fist, the other a colossal cannon of spinning barrels. A hurricane of fire roars from its muzzles. Hundreds of shells expend in moments.

Foedral Fell's body explodes.

The assault cannon's fire is relentless. Unforgiving.

Its aim never wavers and the wretched matter of the Neverborn is atomised.

'You will not. Harm. Him,' says Telemechrus the Contemptor.

XXXIII

Maloq Kartho squats by the water's edge. Waiting.

Time passes, but without his helmet Hol Beloth has no way to accurately measure it. Hours – two, maybe three. He drifts in and out of consciousness as his body diverts energy from his thought processes to healing.

There is no change in the light.

They have survived a fall that ought to have killed them instantly, which tells Hol Beloth that the Dark Apostle still has an endgame in mind. Yet they have wasted time in this cave doing nothing. If there is mayhem to be made, then Hol Beloth wishes to be about it.

Determined to take action, he looks for a way out.

Fifty metres to his left, a wide fissure in the walls leads deeper into the rock. Something metallic gleams on the ground next to the opening.

Hol Beloth forces himself upright. Pain from numerous fractures shoots up his legs. He forces it down as he limps around the edge of the lake to the fissure. Stagnant air wafts from the opening. He takes a long breath, his neuroglottis picking out chemical traces of welded steel and setting

permacrete.

He squats at the opening and lifts the gleaming object from the ground, turning it around in his hands like a precious relic.

It is a cartographae drone, a bulbous cylinder equipped with a repulsor field and numerous auspex arrays. Its power cells are virtually exhausted and its calliper limbs twitch like the feelers of a dying insect. A blinking red gemlight on its frontal lobe tells Hol Beloth that it is trying and failing to link back to its control station. A Techmarine could easily repair it, but he has no skill with machines.

It takes a moment for Hol Beloth to realise the significance of this find.

He turns as booming splashes, like boulders falling into the lake, fill the cave with spray. Maloq Kartho rises on his oddly-jointed legs. He wipes cold water from his face as more huge objects splash down into the water from above. The surface of the lake churns and slaps the rock. A trail of bubbles moves towards to the shore.

Hol Beloth watches as Eriesh Kigal and his Terminators rise from the dark waters like drowned sailors returned to unnatural life. Water pours from the battered plates of their armour and as each one reaches the Dark Apostle, he is anointed with three crosswise slashes across his breastplate. Without knowing how, Hol Beloth senses a significance to the thrice clawed mark.

Then a bloated shape of hard red metal emerges from the water, a leviathan of the deeps. The Dreadnought Zu Gunara. Its casket drips black water and what look like molten scads of metal that are running in rivulets from its armoured flanks. It is as though the Dreadnought is melting, as though the void-dark within is consuming the matter containing its substance.

It still carries the weapon stolen from CV427/Praxor, its bio-hazard symbol like a beacon of hope in the gloom of the cave.

‘And the devourer of life shall be borne into the belly of the Beast,’ says Kartho, turning to Hol Beloth. The Dark Apostle gestures to the fissure in the rock where Hol Beloth found the damaged drone. A forked tongue of corrugated flesh licks jagged teeth. Hol Beloth knows the Dark Apostle tastes what he has tasted.

Turned earth, blasted rock. Construction.

A way in.

‘The Unveiled One shall open the way,’ says Kartho, ‘and he that was lost shall lead the faithful to the slaughter.’

Hol Beloth holds up the cartographae drone. Purpose fills him and he throws the machine out into the water. It drops into the darkness, the red gemlight fading as it sinks to the bottom of the lake. He looks back at the fissure that leads to the heart of enemy’s lair.

‘The belly of the beast?’ says Hol Beloth, the pain of his many wounds forgotten.

‘We are the blade that opens it,’ promises Maloq Kartho.

XXXIV

Subiaco cannot escape the grip of his nightmare.

He is awake. He knows this, but wishes he were not.

His nightmare has followed him into the waking world.

His wife’s face, the skin ruddy and gracefully aged, is crumbling parchment, flaking and diseased. Even his children, youngsters barely of age to stand in the Youth Auxilia, bear the scars of time’s assault.

He flees his hab, barely dressed, and sees that everything he has feared has come to pass. Beyond the walls of the Ultimus, the billions of tonnes of rock that keeps them safe is no more than a paper-thin veneer of flaking ash and wire, a structure so fragile he cannot bear to look at it or the unimaginable, ocean-dark presences uncoiling behind it.

The planet shifts and creaks as void-born gales strip the world's substance away with every breath. Subiaco screams, but his words are snatched away by cold winds whose origin has no place and no time. Thousands upon thousands of faces surround him, but he sees them for what they truly are: rotting puppets that degenerate with every passing second. A multitude that does not know how close their death really is.

Tap, *tap*, *tap*...

Subiaco hears the polished steel talons of the beasts once again. They have broken the walls of sleep and are coming for him. The ragged, cloth-tear sound of dread claws being ripped through dimensions grates down his spine and he breaks into a run.

Wounded faces turn and question him. Their words are gurgling death rattles. He pushes past them all, knocking many to the ground. Wet claws and lamprey-like mouths press up from the ground, sensing the nearness of prey. Nobody sees them, and Subiaco's warnings fall upon deaf ears.

Subiaco runs, down into the deeps, away from the masses of the dead-in-waiting.

He runs past the places he has worked since finding sanctuary in Arcology X. He runs until the acid burns in his limbs and his lungs fill with bile. The hunting beasts are close. He feels their nearness. He dares not look back. The very sight of them will paralyse him, and there is only one escape.

He hears voices behind him and ignores them.

At last he reaches his salvation, the cyclopean gate with the Clockwork Angel puzzle sealing it shut. He is almost hysterical with relief. There are giants here, warriors whose bodies are just as rotten as those above, but which are locked in an eternal battle with the forces that drive their flesh to its doom.

Subiaco ignores them. They are just as dead as the thousands of people above.

Tap, *tap*, *tap*...

He has no time. None.

Subiaco climbs to the Clockwork Angel, and it seems that its wings reach out to enfold him. He hears his name barked in the booming tones of a being whose physiology has been so altered and enhanced that it barely qualifies as human.

The authority and warning are unmistakable, but he is too far gone to stop now.

He punches the solution to the age-old riddle of the Clockwork Angel into the ornate keyboard of brass and jet. The mechanisms of the door break apart as command codes of the Ingenium are accepted by the locking seal. Resonant harmonic frequencies blast through the permacrete, turning it to powder in the blink of an eye.

A falling curtain of dissolving permacrete is the last thing he sees as his chest cavity detonates explosively in a fan of shattered bone.

Sergeant Ankrion's mass-reactive kills Ingenium Subiaco instantly.

His body falls from the platform before the locking seal as whetted chainfists, lightning claws and thunder hammers tear through from the other side.

XXXV

Eriesh Kigal kills the first Ultramarine with a spray of bolts from his combi-weapon. He kills the next one too. His warriors fan out around him. Those with guns fill the space with explosive bolts. Ricochets and splintered rock fly through the air. Answering gunfire spanks from the massive plates of their Terminator armour. Las-rounds are ineffective and mass-reactives only marginally less so.

Hol Beloth has only his sword and wades into the fight like one of Angron's gladiators. Aside from a few Ultramarines who are even now falling back, there is little sport to be had here. His blade is wet and red, but it is the thin blood of mortals. It drips from his blade as Maloq Kartho squeezes his growing bulk through the hole torn in the shuttering that sealed this tunnel off from the underground lake.

Zu Gunara comes next, still carrying the world-killer in his mechanised arms.

Word of their coming will already be racing to the heart of this arcology.

Fear will strike at the hearts of its people. They will know that death has come to them.

Hol Beloth's body is a searing furnace. His skin smokes with it and the rotten smell of sulphur fills his nose and mouth. It seems the Dark Apostle is not the only one on the verge of a transformation. Hol Beloth has longed for this moment since first he set foot on Calth, and he can literally taste his reward.

Eriesh Kigal and his Terminators lead the way, climbing higher with every passing moment. The cave is wide and filled with gunfire. A squad of Ultramarines and some uniformed mortals in the colours of the Defence Auxilia are shooting at them. They cower in hastily-erected barricades. He sees that each man has a black X daubed somewhere on his armour. He does not understand the significance of this, and dismisses it as irrelevant.

Hol Beloth feels a stinging sensation at his chest and sees a black burn scar from a las-impact. The skin is curdled and scorched, but he feels no pain. None at all.

The tunnel turns and widens, its ceiling rising up to almost thirty metres. More soldiers are moving to intercept them. Gunfire intensifies. None of it matters. Three Ultramarines attempt to impose order on the few soldiers at their disposal. A pair of armoured vehicles rumble into view, a Rhino and a civilian cargo transporter with a pair of heavy stubbers welded onto a primitive turret.

The Rhino's guns hammer the Terminators, and one of the mighty warriors stumbles as the heavier weight of fire finds a weak spot. Hol Beloth wonders why it is taking so long for the Ultramarines to respond to the terrible threat in their midst. Then he understands the sacrifice of Foedral Fell.

The Ultramarines are not here. Not in any numbers of significance.

The gunner of the Rhino brackets the wounded Terminator and hammers him again and again. It is a successful tactic, as the percussive chain of explosions eventually cracks the armour open. The warrior within is cut apart and his armour sags with his death.

Maloq Kartho leaps into the air, his reverse-jointed legs powering him over the heads of the Ultramarines. He is in amongst them, his clawed arms like threshing blades. He rips them apart, tearing war-plate open with his bare hands and hurling body parts aside like butcher's waste. Bolt rounds flatten upon his iron-hard flesh, blades bounce off him; his laughter is that of a being who has achieved his heart's desire and found it more wondrous than he ever hoped.

The Ultramarines are dead, and Kartho charges the Rhino. Its driver sees the danger and guns the engine. The tracks spin furiously, but not fast enough – Kartho smashes into the vehicle like a wrecking ball. The hull of the Rhino buckles inwards explosively. Flames rip from within and the engine gives out with a hard bang of combustion.

Kartho's charge has broken the tank in two. A sweep of his bulging arms hurls the wreckage away.

Eriesh Kigal kills the up-armed civilian transporter. A hail of high-impact rounds blows its engine

block apart and the explosion lifts it ten metres into the air.

His Terminators are unstoppable juggernauts; small-arms fire is an irrelevance and they are proof against most blades. Storms of fire batter the curved plates and layered plastrons, but none of it has any effect. An unstoppable line of armour pushes inexorably forward, climbing higher into the arcology with every passing moment. The armed forces that remain here will be mustering above, but they will be too late to prevent the wholesale destruction of Calth.

There are too few defences here to stop the Word Bearers. In their arrogance, the Ultramarines think they are secure, that their way of doing things is the only way. Blind to the virtues of free thinking, the XIII have sealed their fate by clinging to an outmoded way of war. The old ways are gone, and a new order is rising.

The Ultramarines have failed to embrace that. It will be their undoing.

Hol Beloth grunts in sudden pain. The enemy has not wounded him. This is not the already forgotten pain of a gunshot or a sword cut. Things are breaking inside his body. Bones shift, elongate. Organs squirm and reshape themselves. Blood grows sluggish as its composition alters. His vision blurs as nictitating membranes form over his eyes. Old pain diminishes and new pain replaces it.

Hol Beloth throws away his sword. The blade is broken just above the hilt, but he has no memory of it snapping. He has a dagger at his hip, one of the crude, flint-bladed things Erebus presented to the anointed ones. He does not draw it.

He has no need of it now, for his fingers sprout claws like sword blades.

Flames and the cries of the dying are all that they leave in their wake.

More slaughter awaits ahead.

Hol Beloth ascends into the administration level of Arcology X.

He sees thousands of mortals cowering here, clustered around a building of polished white marble. He no longer sees as he once did. His sight is that of a voracious predator.

His world is blood hues, flesh smells and fear-stink.

It is good.

XXXVI

The Defence Auxilia and Ingenium Support Division are responding with incredible speed. Army units integrated into the chain of command are already in place, but Hamadri fears it is too little, too late. She watches the Word Bearers fight their way into the sprawling administration level from the upper hatch of a Chimera.

'How they can be here?' she asks herself, knowing that the question is meaningless now.

Captain Ullyet is already fighting, his Salamander command vehicle racing back and forth at the entrance to the sub-caves. No sooner had Sergeant Ankrion's warning of the breach in the lower levels gone out over every active vox-network than the tanks of the 77th Support Division roared into action.

His vehicles are cargo carriers, engineering rigs and combat support tanks – armed with anti-personnel weapons, they are no match for Space Marine Terminators. The Defence Auxilia moves to assist, Hamadri's orders sending her tanks around the flanks to keep the enemy boxed in.

Her Chimera bounces over the uneven ground and Hamadri sees how few enemy warriors there are: six Terminators and a Dreadnought, and two monstrous things to which she can give no name. One is taller than the Dreadnought, its flesh blackening even as she looks at it, as though it burns in a

fire she cannot see. The other is a hunched, swollen thing with scraps of blood-red plate embedded in the mass of its body. Its engorged muscles expand like overfilled fuel bladders and its arms end in flailing bone-swords.

It would, on paper, be a paltry force with which to invade Arcology X.

But it may well be enough.

'Bring us in on the right,' she orders her driver.

The Chimera slews around, its tracks spitting rock fragments. Hamadri brings the rotor cannon around and depresses the firing triggers. Thudding recoil slams back against her palms, but she keeps the weapon on target. A stream of bullets strikes the monster with the bone-swords, and her shots only falter when the thing looks up at her with eyes that are windows into madness.

The beast vaults into the air, an impossible leap. Hamadri cranks the pintle-mounted weapon around and opens fire. The angle is too steep, her shots too low. The creature lands on the Chimera's frontal section with a ringing hammerblow. The impact is colossal, its weight out of all proportion to its size. The Chimera's hull is crushed and the tank turns end over end like a flipped aquila coin.

Hamadri has a fraction of a second's life left.

She wonders if her son in the Numinus 61st is still alive. Better that he is dead than have to fight a war against such monsters.

The Chimera slams down on its topside and Colonel Riuk Hamadri joins the long list of those killed in action.

XXXVII

The change is upon him.

His flesh is *becoming*. The rituals have been observed, the sacrifices made.

Maloq Kartho has attracted the eye of the gods and he feels the immense power that awaits him. He awaits the judgement of his worth. The muttering shadows are gone, drawn to the trap in Foedral Fell's stronghold, but he has no need of them now. He will be his own shadow now, shedding his old identity and clearing out what could have been.

The last piece of him awaits his final offering.

He still senses the warp power's unwillingness to give up its hunt. It has its prey practically in its jaws, but his need is the greater. Without that power his frame will explosively mutate. It will be cast down in a wallowing pit of mindless depravity. A worthy fate for some, but not for him.

He watches Hol Beloth kill with ferocious abandon.

The commander's mind has fractured and this last betrayal is the pact with which he seals his bargain with the monarchs of the warp. Eriesh Kigal's Terminators are still in the fight, though another one has been brought down. The enemy is rallying and bringing their heavier guns to bear. They still think the Word Bearers are here to conquer, to capture.

He laughs, and those mortals who hear him fall dead instantly.

Kartho turns to Zu Gunara.

That name is meaningless. Zu Gunara died for the second time weeks ago. The Dreadnought that once housed his flesh still carries the bio-weapon and now it holds it out to him like an offering. He supposes that is exactly what it is.

The life eater virus is a gift from the gods.

The fighting continues behind him, but he no longer cares.

Kartho opens the arming panel and enters the codes he memorised long ago when the scrapcode attack first compromised Calth's defence network. The virus bomb's circuitry comes to life and a green light bathes the interior of its arming mechanics. The cog-skull insignia of the Mechanicum and the Ultima of the XIII Legion flash baleful warnings. No provision exists for instant deployment, only a preset countdown. It will make no difference.

More warnings chime from the interior of the bomb as he unlocks each security protocol. He ignores them and turns the final arming trigger before snapping it off. Numerous failsafes and redundancies exist to reset the countdown. Kartho destroys them all.

The bomb broadcasts a final countdown signal across a multitude of vox-bands and sets off an unmistakable alarum bray. Such warnings are pointless. Anything close enough to register them will be killed by the release of the virus within minutes.

He sees the realisation of what he has done spread through the Imperial soldiers. Those who don't recognise the threat of the virus bomb's shrieking warning learn through the vox what he has brought into their midst. Soldiers turn and flee. Armoured vehicles blow their engines as they throw their tracks into reverse. The panic and terror is almost overwhelming and Kartho roars with laughter as he sees the vaunted Ultramarian discipline collapse in the face of certain death.

A few braver souls run towards the bomb, perhaps thinking they can disarm it. They are deluding themselves.

He feels his bargain with the warp sealed in the depths of his transforming flesh.

His body has been prepared and now the communion of material and spiritual can take place.

Kartho lifts his hand and sees a glimmer of silver wreathe the tips of his claws.

His very flesh is a knife with which he can cut through the dimensional walls. He senses this is borrowed power, a fleeting gift to enable his union with the warp.

Kartho slashes his hand down through the air and the material wall of the universe parts before him. A poisoned wind gusts from the deep wound, a gateway to the domain of gods and monsters. Soon he will be both.

He feels another of Kigal's Terminators die.

His senses are beyond anything he has known before, and this is just the beginning of his ascension. He pulls the wavering tear in the universe wider, tasting the dark promise of the miasmic void beyond. *This* will be his realm now, not the tasteless material plane of mortals.

But just before he steps through, Maloq Kartho experiences something he thought long since bled out onto the sands of Colchis.

He knows doubt.

He turns from the howling gate in time to see a pair of rad-scarred Land Speeders streak into the cavern. Their engines are overheating and flying on fumes. They have been pushed far beyond their limits to get here.

A pointless gesture.

This bomb *will* detonate. Nothing now can prevent that.

Riding tall in the lead skimmer is an unhelmed warrior in blue and gold. Maloq Kartho has never seen him before, but his transformed senses recognise him immediately.

Remus Ventanus.

XXXVIII

The administrative level is in chaos. Civilians and soldiers alike flee in terror from the figures standing at the heart of the cave – a Dreadnought, and a thick-limbed figure of black scales whose body seems to flicker with dark flame. This is the leader of this dark host.

Ventanus knows it in his bones.

The Dreadnought carries the screaming bomb in its hands, and every frequency is telling him that the life eater warhead is on the verge of detonation. A Word Bearers Terminator is still fighting, but Sydance's speeder is diving towards him. The Terminator has armour that can survive impact with a super-heavy.

Sydance has a multi-melta.

He sees a flash and hears the roar of superheated air, but he doesn't see what happens to the Terminator. The speeder lurches, its engine spluttering its death rattle. That it has brought him this far is nothing short of a miracle.

Selaton has pushed the engine as hard as he can and now it is done.

'Take us down,' Ventanus yells over the screams and chatter of gunfire.

Selaton nods. 'Don't think we've much choice, captain.'

Before the speeder can descend, Ventanus hears a bestial roar. An abominable creature with sword blade arms vaults from the back of a crushed Rhino. It is coming straight at them.

'Incoming!' he yells.

The speeder heels over as Selaton wrenches it around, but even legionary reflexes aren't quite fast enough. The creature's bladed arms slice the vehicle in half, taking Selaton's legs at mid-thigh. Ventanus leaps clear as the speeder ploughs rock and wrecks itself in an explosion of flying steel.

He lands at the run and has his bolter out a second later.

He does not know if Selaton has survived the crash, and has no time to check.

Ventanus confronts the beast that was once Hol Beloth

The beast that brought them down rears up, a wall of expanding tissue and claws. He sees it was once a man, a legionary like him, but whatever hypermutations are wracking its frame are completely out of control. Limbs burst from gristly tumours and fanged mouths erupt across its malleable flesh.

Ventanus empties a magazine into the creature. His shells punch through its metamorphosing body. He hears the detonations, but the creature does not even appear to feel them. He reaches for another magazine, but a heavy paw the size of his chest slams him to the ground. Its bulk is enormous, swelling and evolving in an uncontrolled frenzy.

He reaches for his sword, a chain-weapon taken to replace his lost powerblade.

The creature is screaming. He cannot tell if it is in anger or pain.

Ventanus thrusts the sword into the rippling folds of new flesh and the suction is so great that it tears the blade from his grip. The monster's body swallows the chainsword whole and Ventanus reaches for his next weapon – he unclips a pair of frag grenades from his belt, one in each hand.

Part of him knows that this is folly.

The life eater virus will destroy the monster, regardless of this fight's outcome, but it matters to Ventanus that it dies by his hand.

He punches the grenades into the thing's body, releasing them before his arms suffer the same fate as his sword. Both grenades detonate with a wet thump, showering him with rancid flesh as raw as protoplasm. Open wounds gape, bloody and stringy with unformed matter.

The creature doesn't die. It is too large now, but he has hurt it.

It shrieks from its hundreds of mouths. He has a moment at best to capitalise on its pain.

Then he sees it.

In one gaping wound is a grey-bladed dagger, a weapon clinging to a leather belt that has been subsumed by the expanding flesh of the monster.

He knows what it is. He has used such a weapon before.

Hating that he has no choice, Ventanus reaches in and drags the dagger from the sopping, fleshy wound. He feels the legacy of murder imbued in the glitter-sheened blade. This weapon has a bloody history, but it also has power and he needs that now.

It is a pitifully small thing to wield against so bloated a foe, but Ventanus has first-hand experience of what harm such weapons are capable of wreaking.

The monster's face looms over him, a bloated mass of gibbering mouths, lunatic eyes and lashing tongues. Whoever this once was, he is long gone. Ventanus wonders if he understands what he has become.

A wide mouth of erupting fangs and acidic bile snaps towards him.

'For Calth!' shouts Ventanus and rams the blade up into its throat.

The effect is instantaneous and horrific.

The monster tears open, folding in on itself in unravelling slabs of blood-soaked flesh and fat. Hybrid organs necrotise in seconds and its expanding matter blackens in the space of a breath. The reek of a mass grave gusts from its instantaneous decomposition and gouts of stinking black fluid jet from nameless masses of diseased flesh.

Ventanus staggers back, repulsed beyond measure at the creature's death. Somewhere in the midst of its unmaking, he sees hints of a post-human body, but they too disintegrate before his eyes.

He spits a gobbet of rank fluid and switches his gaze to the immobile Dreadnought that holds the virus bomb.

The scaled black figure with the curling horn stares venom at him. It turns and vanishes through a shimmering hole in the world. Ventanus feels nauseous at the sight of such a violation, at the sickness he sees through the cut. The tear is already growing smaller – the fabric of the world is healing itself, and in seconds the opening will be gone.

The dagger in his hand tugs at his grip. It wants to return to that unclean realm, to go back to where

it was made.

'Sydance!' shouts Ventanus, calling up the bomb's countdown to his visor. 'To me!'

A blue speeder slews around behind him.

'How long?' asks Sydance.

'Ten seconds. Now get out!'

'What? No! I'm going with you.'

'Not this time,' says Ventanus. 'This time there is no thirteenth eldar.'

He kicks Sydance from the speeder and drops into the pilot's seat. The engine belches a plume of irradiated smoke and the skimmer lurches forward, Ventanus coaxing it to one last ride.

The speeder vibrates as though it's about to shake itself apart. The harsh bangs of engine misfire sound behind him, and a plume of flame billows in his wake.

'Come on, fly, damn you!' shouts Ventanus.

The speeder is descending on failing grav-plates, its power almost exhausted, its engine dead. He fights to keep it in the air, hauling the control column back and feeding his every last scrap of will and belief into the machine.

The Dreadnought looms before him, like some immovable leviathan.

Ventanus drops the warp-tainted dagger onto the gunner's seat.

'For courage and honour!' he shouts. 'For the Emperor!'

A last surge of power fills the engine and Ventanus triggers the forward guns as he throws himself from the speeder. He hits the ground hard and rolls as the skimmer smashes into the Dreadnought at full speed. The collision is ferocious, the speeder's momentum unstoppable.

The Dreadnought rocks back on its piston legs. Then the engine block explodes and the blast throws it back.

Its gyroscopic stabilisers fight for balance. They fail.

The Dreadnought falls and is swallowed by the sucking wound in the world. It vanishes from Calth and the tear seals up behind it.

Ventanus holds his breath, counting the seconds. He waits for an explosion that never comes. He doesn't know where the bomb with its lethal life eater virus has gone, but it is not on Calth. That is good enough for him.

He turns to the sound of cheering. It takes him a moment to realise that it is for him.

The people of Arcology X are shouting his name.

No, not his name, his *title*.

Saviour of Calth.

And for the first time, Remus Ventanus feels that he has earned it.

No one is coming, then. Our numbers don't count – that's it, isn't it? We southern islanders are just too scattered. Our cities aren't big enough. The enemy turned our lands to glass and ash. How could there be survivors? No point in looking, right?

To whoever finds this – I don't want this to be easy for you. I survived. Do you understand? I survived the wave and the fires. The enemy is gone, and I'm still out here. Only now the sun is killing me, and I don't know why, and the sky is still empty of help.

Damn you. Damn all of you.

DARK HEART

Anthony Reynolds

Heavy footsteps halted outside the makeshift cell. The postulant's time of judgement had arrived.

He was sitting cross-legged upon the deck, his back straight. He had been sitting in that position for the better part of a day. In that time, his body had healed the worst of the injuries his brothers had inflicted upon him.

The postulant lifted his head and saw himself reflected in the locked cell door. For all his advanced transhuman physiology, his face was still mottled with purple bruises. Dried, flaking blood caked his cheek and lips. Like all born under the relentless suns of Colchis, his skin was swarthy and his eyes dark. His bloodshot gaze was sullen.

He knew his features were broader and heavier than those of unaltered humans, who looked strangely fragile and delicate to him now. He still dimly remembered what he had looked like before his rebirth into this more exalted form; most of the Legion did not. In time, he supposed that he too would forget his life in the temple before he became a part of the XVII Legion.

He had been stripped of his armour. It had once been granite-grey, but now it was the red of congealed blood, in honour of the revered Gal Vorbak. Oh, to see the things that they had seen...

His thoughts were interrupted as the cell locks were thrown, accompanied by a groan of metal. The hatch swung wide, and a pair of crimson-armoured veterans stepped into the cell, ducking their helmeted heads. Their heavy plate was hung with fetishes and inscribed with Colchisian cuneiform.

He knew them, of course. They were Bel Ashared's warriors. Between them, they had seen a century and a half more warfare than he had.

There was a controlled aggression in their posture, and their gauntleted hands were clenched into fists. That they wanted to rip him limb from limb was obvious. That they had not yet done so was... surprising. Something held them back.

'Well?' he said.

'Stand up, Marduk,' said one of them, his vox-grille turning his voice to a throaty, animalistic growl.

'Why?' he said. 'What is to be done with me?'

He saw the blow coming, but refused to flinch from it. It struck him on the side of his head, slamming him hard into the unforgiving metal of the cell wall. He crashed to the deck, and hot blood ran down his face. He tasted it on his lips.

But he did not cry out. He did not wipe the blood from his face. He merely stared up at his attacker, uncowed.

He was hauled to his feet, and did not resist. His own distorted reflection stared back at him in the emotionless lenses of the veteran warrior holding him upright. His cracked lips parted into a bloody grin.

'You hit like a feeble woman,' he chuckled.

The veteran growled and slammed his armoured forehead into Marduk's face.

Darkness.

He turned the helmet over in his hands. It was a prototype Mark VI design, part of the last shipment the Legion had received from Mars, in a deep, arterial crimson – the colour of the Legion reborn. Its lenses glittered like emeralds, slanted menacingly as it stared back at him.

He flipped it over, and set it into the waiting calliper-stand, which adjusted itself to the helmet's

weight and shape, cradling and holding it steady. He reached for his electro-stylus, drawing it from its holder. Tapping the activation rune with his index finger, it began to vibrate with a dull hum. With his free hand he adjusted the position of the helmet, angling it to best allow him access to its curved interior. He brought the fine synth-diamond tip down towards the smooth, unadorned surface.

He paused.

Looking away, he glanced towards the ritual Octed, enshrined in the shadow of a small alcove in the corner opposite the low-burning brazier. The flames seemed to dim, and the temperature dropped. Hoarfrost crept across the walls. The darkness itself began to move, writhing and growing.

Tendrils of shadow reached out, groping blindly. They felt their way up the walls, worming across the ceiling and the deck. One of them touched him. Its caress was like ice. The darkness closed in, drawing his robed body into its embrace.

A steaming breath touched his neck. It reeked of tainted nightmares and rotting flesh.

The creeping darkness whispered to him, a dozen voices of madness blended into one. Blood began to leak from his ears. The stylus in his hand began to twitch.

He communed with this envoy of the Primordial Truth. Pledges were made. More blood was spilled.

An hour passed. Perhaps more.

Hell retreated finally, uncoiling itself from him and sliding back through the worn-thin veil of reality. The brazier came back to life, flames crackling, and its low light filled the room once again. Marduk winced as he released his grip on the stylus. His hand was locked in a painful claw. In fact, his whole body ached.

He glanced down at the helmet still cradled in the arms of the calliper-stand. The curved interior was covered in tiny cuneiform script. Not a single centimetre was untouched.

The handwriting was not his own.

'Let it be so,' he said.

He came to with a start, jerking into wakefulness. Something was inside his mind, squirming and probing. It was oily and vile, the intrusion sickening.

Marduk resisted. It pushed deeper in response, asserting its dominance.

Finally, content with its vulgar display of power, the presence retreated. A throbbing pain behind Marduk's eyes was all that was left in its wake, aside from the acrid taste of warp-spoor in the back of his throat.

He struggled to focus. The lights were too bright. He blinked heavily, clearing his head.

He was in the master control room. Zetsun Verid Yard.

He was on his knees, and veteran legionaries stood nearby – the newest of the Gal Vorbak. He felt their anger. It radiated from them like the heat of a furnace.

Calth filled the view portal. Even from orbit, evidence of the war below was clearly visible. Plumes of smoke and dust spread from the continent below like vast algal blooms. They reached high into the atmosphere, shot through with light of varied hues.

A cracked voice laden with authority echoed in the chamber. 'All things are at their most beautiful in death, are they not?'

Marduk struggled to locate its source. *Focus*.

Robed magi scurried about the platform's control centre, while others were hunched over consoles and plugged into MIU ports. It was not one of them that had spoken, however.

'The battle still rages, though the war is as good as won.'

Marduk's eyes were drawn to a figure standing apart from the others, staring out into the void.

There.

The air shimmered around this unholy figure. The membrane between reality and the realm of the Primordial Truth was stretched thin in his presence.

Kor Phaeron. Master of the Faith.

'The Thirteenth Legion is crippled, and Calth forever scarred. The sun is dying. The surface will be scoured. The last pockets of resistance will be forced underground, but it will do them no good. The planet is in its death throes. This is my victory. Not Erebus's. Not even Lorgar's. This victory is *mine*.'

The revered cardinal turned. His eyes radiated fervour and flickered with unnatural energies. 'This whole system is a corpse,' he said. 'It just doesn't yet realise it's already dead.'

He came closer, and Marduk fought the urge to step back.

'Bel Ashared's warriors wish to rip out your hearts and feast upon them while you still draw breath,' growled Kor Phaeron. 'I am tempted to indulge them. What did you hope to achieve?'

Marduk's skin tingled. Looking upon Kor Phaeron made his eyes hurt and he lowered his gaze.

'*Look at me*,' wheezed Kor Phaeron, his voice laced with thunder.

Marduk did as he was commanded; he doubted he would have been able to resist even had he tried.

By the time the Legion found Colchis and was reunited with their primarch, Kor Phaeron was already suffering the ravages of mortality. He was old then, too old to undergo the full augmentation procedures to become a true Space Marine. He still looked old now, but as frail and hunched as he was within his armour, there was an undeniable, fierce vitality about him.

It was more than constant rejuvenat treatments that fuelled him – it was a dangerous and fevered energy that burned hot, voracious and dangerous. It must have taken supreme willpower to keep it from consuming him. There were likely only a handful of beings in the galaxy that could have maintained that state without quickly becoming a hollow, burned out shell.

'This is *my* war, postulant,' hissed Kor Phaeron. '*Mine*. To fail in it was never an option. Taking this platform was integral to the plan. Our victory depended upon it. You understand this?'

'Yes, my lord,' said Marduk.

'*Yes, my lord*,' mimicked Kor Phaeron with a sneer. 'Yet it is at this precious moment, with success or failure hanging in the balance, that you chose to turn against your mentor?'

'It was not my–' began Marduk, but he was silenced as the Dark Cardinal's eyes flared. Warp-vapour steamed from his cadaverous sockets.

'It was not your intention to imperil the taking of this station?' Kor Phaeron snarled. 'Perhaps not, but that is what you did. Perhaps you thought nothing at all, blinded by your lust to rise above your station by murdering one of your betters. *Your own mentor*. Your lack of respect is an insult.'

'What is the purpose of a teacher who will not teach?' asked Marduk. 'He was no mentor to me. I was glad to kill him.'

There was a wordless objection from one of the veterans standing at his back, and he heard a blade drawn from its sheath.

'No,' growled Kor Phaeron to the warrior, malignant light flickering around him like a halo. The blade slid back into place.

'Even if he had any inclination to teach me, I would have learnt nothing from him,' Marduk continued, boldly. 'His soul was blunted to the Primordial Truth, and his mind rigid and inflexible. It angered him that I was more attuned to the pantheon than he could ever be. That is why he refused to teach me. I was sent here to learn the ways of an acolyte, and yet I was placed under the guidance of a

warrior with no aptitude for warp-craft.'

'Clearly, then, he deserved to die,' said Kor Phaeron.

Marduk grimaced. 'No, I do not mean–'

'You feel insulted in having been placed under Bel Ashared's tutelage? Bel Ashared served the Legion faithfully for almost a century, while you are barely more than a neophyte. How long have you fought as part of the Seventeenth? Two decades? Three? You are nothing but an ingrate child.'

'I am young,' said Marduk, 'but I am not without talent. I yearn to master the powers that you command, my lord.'

Kor Phaeron glared at him, and Marduk's soul shrank from the vitriol apparent in that gaze.

'Something you would not have known is that Bel Ashared was of the Dark Heart,' said Kor Phaeron. 'A member of that sect which has served as my bloody right hand since the time of the Covenant. The Dark Heart served me at a time when Lorgar Aurelian was but an infant, and has continued to serve me through everything that has come about since then. Bel Ashared was of the Dark Heart, and you killed him because he was not the teacher you had hoped for?'

Marduk's mouth had gone dry. 'I... I did not know,' he muttered.

Kor Phaeron glared at him for a moment, before swinging away, hands twisted into claws. When he spoke, his voice was more measured.

'You say you wish to master such powers as I command. Why?' he said, looking out towards Calth.

Marduk did not answer immediately.

'It's a simple question,' said Kor Phaeron. 'Answer it.'

'I want to serve our primarch and the Legion to the best of my abilities,' said Marduk, finally.

Kor Phaeron laughed then. It was an ugly sound, like the wet cough of a sick animal.

'You would have best served the Legion by not killing your own mentor during a critical tactical insertion,' he said. Warp-light flashed, exposing Kor Phaeron's skull, jawbone and teeth within his emaciated flesh. '*Power* is your motivation. Do not insult me by pretending otherwise. You lust for power.'

'Don't you?' Marduk replied.

Kor Phaeron eyed Marduk for a long moment, and then snorted.

'Why need I lust for that which I already possess?'

'I don't imagine *a man* could ever possess enough power,' Marduk replied, carefully loading his words with subtle emphasis. 'They could always have more. Yes, I lust for power. Teach me. I implore you.'

Kor Phaeron narrowed his eyes. 'What makes you think I would wish to share my knowledge with you?'

'Because you want to know how I did it,' Marduk replied. 'Otherwise, I'd be dead already.'

Before he could reply, a wracking cough shook Kor Phaeron's body. He wiped black saliva from his lips. 'Bel Ashared had some power, but perhaps I misjudged him,' he said, a gauntleted hand held over his mouth. 'Clearly he misjudged you. I have no real interest in teaching an arrogant upstart such as yourself, but you are right in one thing – I am intrigued. So tell me, how *did* you manage it?'

Marduk licked his lips, knowing that his life hung by the most slender of threads. He knew that he would have to frame his answer carefully.

The shipyards were burning. Twisted wreckage and debris spun silently in the blackness; some of that wreckage was recognisable as having once been battleships and defence platforms, though most was so mangled as to be practically unidentifiable. There was a serene kind of beauty to the gently rotating

junk and flotsam, each tortured chunk of metal turning at its own speed and pitch. The absolute silence of the void made the scene of destruction almost peaceful.

Close your eyes, thought Marduk, and you would never know anything was amiss.

The *Samothrace* cut through the silently spinning debris like a blade. It passed through the slip gates of the Zetsun Verid Yard unopposed. There was no reason for the weapons platform to suspect the *Samothrace* of anything untoward. The ship was one of the lucky few of the Ultramarines fleet to have escaped the mayhem unscathed.

It slowed its approach, and docked unchallenged.

Sorot Tchure led the way through, as ever. Bel Ashared followed closely, and the legionaries of the XVII advanced in the wake of the two officers. They all understood that theirs was a key component of this most critical of endeavours. They knew that they were blessed to have been chosen for this task. Their hunger to begin the cleansing of the station was strong.

Marduk's secondary heart had kicked in. To fight alongside such august warriors as the Gal Vorbak was a great honour.

Kor Phaeron would join them when the deed was done. The crawling sensation that had tingled at the back of Marduk's skull was tantalising and electric as the Keeper of the Faith let the minions of the warp bear him away to wherever he had gone. Marduk lusted for the day when he too would wield such power.

Those serving on board the Zetsun Verid Yard had no idea what was about to befall them. Nor were the arrogant sons of the XIII Legion assigned to the platform aware of the events that were already in motion. Their ignorance was delicious.

As they left the first transit voidlock, an Ultramarine stepped forward to challenge the unexpected boarding party. He was not wearing his cobalt-blue helm, clearly not expecting an attack, nor yet realising that he had but seconds to live. Absurdly, he did not even reach for his weapon. His face bore an expression of puzzlement.

Marduk laughed to himself. Oh, this was *too* good.

The Ultramarine – a sergeant, by his markings – opened his mouth to voice... what? A greeting? A challenge? Either way, he never got the chance to speak. A bolt-round was fired, the first of many that would be unleashed in the next few minutes. The Ultramarine was struck in the face, just under his left cheekbone. *Boom*.

The first kill again belonged to Sorot Tchure.

There was something special about killing Space Marines, something powerful. It was utterly unlike killing lesser beings. Humans had such fleeting, insignificant lives. Yes, he remembered being one of them, but it felt like a dream, or a life that belonged to someone else. He felt little in ending their lives, but severing the life-thread of legionaries gave a thrill unlike any he had known. It was intoxicating.

The Ultramarine fell to the ground with a resounding crash, seeming like a fallen Titan in the enclosed space. The reverberating sound faded, and for a moment there was silence.

Faces turned. Mouths gaped open, aghast, as crew members registered the headless Ultramarine splayed out on the deck. Blood was spreading in a widening circle around him. It dripped down through the metal slats of the decking. Drip. Drip. Drip.

Most of those stationed here were non-combatants, the majority being technicians and adepts. Moderati. Magi. Officers. Ratings. Most had never drawn the sidearms worn at their hips – it was merely a part of their uniform, like their epaulets or their pins of servitude. They were working hard to restore communications, trying desperately to contact Calth and the fleet via vox or the local

noosphere, but nothing was working.

They were completely unprepared for this new attack.

The Word Bearers did not waste their ammunition. They moved in with chain-blade and fist, snapping bodies like dry tinder, punching heads from shoulders. Marduk crushed a skull with the butt of his bolter. It collapsed pleasingly. He grabbed a robed adept as he tried to flee, clasping the man's neck in his gauntlet. He lifted him off his feet and shook him; vertebra snapped and the adept went limp. Marduk hurled the dead weight back into the terrified mob.

High-powered las-fire peppered the deck, stabbing into red armour, burning and scorching. The platform was, it seemed, not completely defenceless. Marduk turned, scanning. There, atop a raised gantry – Mechanicum praetorians. Here at least was a foe worthy of his bolter.

Beasts of war bedecked in baroque bronzed armour, the praetor-ians laid down a torrent of fire. Two of the assaulting XVII went down, their armour smoking. Marduk pumped a pair of bolt rounds into one of the armoured creatures, forcing it back on reverse-hinged piston legs. Flesh and metal ruptured, black oil blending with milky synth-blood splattering forth from the wounds Marduk had inflicted, but it did not fall.

His aim was thrown off as a human wretch stumbled blindly into him. Marduk cursed, and bashed the man to the ground. He stamped down hard, silencing the pitiful mewling.

He raised his bolter, seeking to fire upon the praetorian again. His assigned mentor, Bel Ashared, had closed the distance, and was engaging the creature of the Mechanicum up close. The Word Bearers captain was blocking his kill-shot. Marduk cursed again.

Angrily, he took a quick step to the side and slammed his bolter into the face of a man who happened to be staggering past, his face ashen grey. The mortal, a robed adept of some kind, was missing one arm – it had been ripped off at the shoulder by one of Bel Ashared's warriors. Marduk's blow caved in his face, and he fell. Marduk flicked a chunk of bloody flesh and hair from his weapon's casing.

He saw Bel Ashared knock the praetorian war-beast to the ground with a backhand blow. The captain stepped on its weapon arm, pinning it to the ground with his boot, and buried his humming power axe in its chest. The praetorian brayed an enraged mix of binary code and flesh-voice. It died slowly, gargling and twitching.

Marduk reached his master's side. Blood and oil spattered the captain's armour, forming rivulets in the gaps between the interlocking plates of his armour. Marduk could feel the tingle of warp presence all around them – things beyond the ken of mortal men rippled and writhed just beyond the veil. Cracked voices whispered at the edge of his hearing, scratching at his sanity.

'Fear and death are thinning the shroud between this world and the other,' Marduk noted, glancing around him.

'What?' said Bel Ashared.

'The Dwellers Beyond hunger to cross over,' said Marduk. 'Do you not feel it, my lord?'

He saw Bel Ashared's clenched fists tighten, perhaps sensing that he was being mocked.

'Your insight is astounding, whelp,' the captain snapped, contempt thick in his voice. 'An idiot abhuman *child* could feel it.'

'Most within the Legion do not,' said Marduk. 'They are blind.'

As are you, he thought.

'Do not think yourself special,' said Bel Ashared. 'Far from it. You are chaff. Even your own Chapter didn't want you. You know nothing yet of the truth of the universe, nor of the powers growing on the other side.'

‘So teach me,’ replied Marduk.

‘Some things cannot be rushed.’

‘Such as your ascension into the Gal Vorbak, lord?’

His mentor looked at him. Hidden behind his helm, his expression was impossible to read, but after a moment he laughed. It was an ugly sound, his grilled vox-unit turning it to a harsh bark.

‘Go away, whelp,’ he said. He waved a hand dismissively, splattering flecks of blood across Marduk’s faceplate – a droplet settled on one of his visor lenses, tingeing the postulant’s vision red. ‘I have no time for your nonsense.’

‘You are my mentor,’ said Marduk. ‘My place is at your side.’

‘I am not a nursemaid. Leave me. We have a station to take,’ said Bel Ashared, turning away. ‘Go with Dralzir’s squad.’

Marduk swung away, saying nothing.

The dock was clear. Corpses were scattered across the deck like broken and discarded playthings. The Word Bearers were splitting into smaller detachments and spreading out to penetrate deeper into the weapons platform. They were all familiar with the schematics of Zetsun Verid, and they needed no prompting.

From one of the adjoining passageways came the deep boom of bolter fire. Evidently the enemy were not going to be difficult to find, but the members of Dralzir Assault Squad were still sifting through the fleshy ruin of the fallen along the dock. They moved from body to body, checking for any signs of life, cutting the throats of those who still remained – one quick slash from ear to ear with their combat blades – before moving on. Not for them the grace and grandeur of a ritual blade, Marduk noted. He joined them as they continued their grisly task.

Dralzir was a tight unit of veterans. They had won the praise of the primarch himself in years past, and been decorated for their deeds in more than a dozen Compliance actions; kill-markings, campaign badges and cult symbols decorated the curved surfaces of their plate. They tolerated his presence, but their disdain for him was always there. He was not one of them.

Only one of the squad’s members acknowledged him – a novitiate, just recently bonded with his first suit of power armour. He was as much an outsider as Marduk, and the only warrior within the boarding party who was newer to the Legion than he. His armour was almost embarrassingly untouched.

This new recruit was kneeling over a fallen adept who was sprawled upon the deck, one of his legs twisted unnaturally beneath him. The man was trying to get away, but the novitiate had one knee on his chest, which was slowly crushing him, forcing his breath in ragged, pained gasps.

‘Did you see that blue bastard’s head go up?’ asked the novitiate, looking up at Marduk.

‘I did, Burias,’ said Marduk.

‘And the expression on the arrogant bastard’s face just before he was hit? Glorious!’

The robed adept tried to draw a pistol. It was a simple las-weapon, but it shook wildly in his hand. Burias grabbed the man’s wrist before he could level the barrel, and he bent it backwards with almost no effort.

Snap.

The man screamed. Burias silenced him with a blow to the temple that broke his neck.

‘He didn’t even get a chance to say anything. He just opened his mouth, and *boom*!’ Burias stood, wiping blood from his hands. ‘You are fighting with us today?’

‘So it would seem,’ said Marduk.

Burias cocked his head for a moment. ‘Is it true that you were expelled from your own Chapter and

sent here to join the Calth assault?'

Marduk snorted.

'It may as well be,' he said. 'I was sent here to learn the ways of the acolyte. There was no ulterior motive in that, as far as I am aware.'

'You will be an Apostle some day, then?'

'Not at this rate,' said Marduk.

'Enough chatter,' snarled the squad's sergeant, Dralzir, striding towards them. Two Ultramarines helmets hung at his waist – the sergeant was not a warrior to be trifled with. 'It's time to move.'

'Everyone here's dead anyway,' Burias muttered, kicking the corpse at his feet.

Marduk smiled to himself.

Burias's armour was smoking. Plasma burn. He had been lucky, though – a direct hit would have cored right through him. He hugged the bulkhead, using it for cover as he reloaded his Umbra-pattern bolter, ramming a fresh sickle-magazine home.

Another blur of white-blue plasma screamed through the hatchway, narrowly missing Burias, who merely laughed. The novitiate had some skill, but he was reckless. He would be lucky to see another battle after this, Marduk thought. He hoped he would, though. He had come to enjoy watching Burias kill.

Plasma slammed against the wall opposite the open portal, exploding in a burst of searing light. From within the chamber there came an angry, screeching hiss: the telltale sound of a plasma gun overheat.

'*Take them*!' Dralzir bellowed.

Responding instantly, Marduk spun out from cover. Dralzir, Burias and Udama-sin were with him, charging through the gap.

Only small pockets of resistance such as this now remained upon the Zetsun Verid Yard, though their defiance merely prolonged the inevitable. Still, the delay had angered Bel Ashared, and that had in turn angered Sergeant Dralzir. Other squads were already pushing towards the control room at the heart of the platform, while they lagged behind.

He had split his warriors into two smaller combat squads – a tactic first adopted, ironically, by Guilliman's Legion – and it was his task to root out any resistance in the lower levels of Zetsun Verid before proceeding.

A bolt round took Udama-sin almost as soon as they were in the open. Marduk did not look back to see if he lived. Gunfire lit up the darkened room in stark bursts, and Marduk saw blue-armoured targets in front of him. His focus narrowed.

There were only two still standing. There had been others, but they had been taken down in the first moments of the firefight. One had been caught by a frag grenade detonation; another had been dropped by a clean headshot from Dralzir's bolt pistol.

The two Ultramarines were hunkered down behind a makeshift barricade of jumbled cargo crates and machinery. One had a bolter at his shoulder, firing in controlled bursts; he had a vertical white crest on his helmet, a XIII Legion honorific marking him as a 'Company First Sergeant' or some such rank. The other held a malfunctioning plasma gun away from his body as it vented white-hot vapour, while firing a bolt pistol in his off-hand.

Marduk unleashed a fresh burst of bolter fire as he advanced, covering his brethren as they charged forwards, chainswords roaring. Most of his shots were wild, but one took the bolter-wielding Ultramarine in the shoulder. The damage inflicted was only superficial, though, and not enough to put

him down.

A bolt round half spun the young novitiate, Burias, making him stumble. Marduk heard him curse – he was clearly desperate to close with the enemy before his sergeant and more experienced brethren, and prove his worth in the heat of battle.

Marduk kept his bolter pressed to his shoulder, continuing to fire. He was moving out to one side, outflanking the Ultramarines as the others raced straight for the barricade. He concentrated on the same target he had already hit, striking him twice in the chest. He adjusted his aim for a head shot, but his target dropped into cover – the incoming weight of fire was too heavy.

Smoothly switching targets, Marduk swung his aim towards the other Ultramarine. His first shot struck the warrior in the wrist; the mass-reactive shell detonated, blowing his hand clean off and robbing him of his pistol in the process. Undeterred, the Ultra-marine simply brought up the vented plasma gun, adjusting his grip so that it rested upon his forearm, which now ended in a bloodied stump, and levelled it at Marduk.

The Word Bearer hurled himself aside. The sun-like flare of the discharge overwhelmed his armour's auto-senses, and a white haze filled his helmet's vision, rendering him blind for a few heartbeats. Even through his ceramite-insulated armour, he could feel the intense, burning heat of the shot as it screamed past, making the air fizzle.

His vision began to clear, enough to see Dralzir vault the barricade and bury his chainsword in the plasma gunner's neck, the teeth whirring madly as they tore through one of the variant plate's few weak points. He drove the weapon in deep, ripping into flesh, churning through meat and bone. Blood drenched the sergeant's faceplate and chest.

A bolter fired from behind the barricade. Dralzir staggered, struck from behind, and fell forwards over the mutilated body of the Ultramarine he had just cut down.

Now Marduk had a target lock once more. He squeezed off a pair of quick shots, but they missed the mark by scant centimetres. He was about to fire again when a red-armoured figure cut in front of him.

Burias.

Marduk cursed his name, and broke into a run.

Dralzir was trying to rise, struggling to push himself up off the ground. It was impossible to see the extent of his injuries, but it was clear that he was seriously wounded by his sluggish, pained movements.

'Whatever you traitors hope to achieve, it will fail!' roared the Ultramarine, leaning forward and jamming his gun barrel into Dralzir's exposed neck seal, ready to execute the Word Bearers sergeant. 'Know that before you die.'

'*Infidel*!' screamed Marduk as he drove forwards, only a few steps behind that over-eager fool Burias.

Two shots rang out, the bolts' detonation taking Dralzir's head almost completely from his neck and blowing out his eye lenses. He crashed down and blood pooled beneath him, and the Ultramarine shoved his body away.

Marduk spat, and grunted in frustration. Burias was still obscuring his shot.

With a bellow, the headstrong young novitiate leapt over his fallen sergeant's corpse, bringing his chainsword down in a double-handed blow. The Ultramarine used the stock of his bolter to block, but the roaring adamantium teeth still bore down towards the legionary's helmet, chewing and spitting against the weapon's casing.

With a swift movement, the Ultramarine stepped to one side and turned, shifting the angle of his

bolter sharply and unbalancing Burias. The momentum carried the novitiate forwards, his chainsword roaring as it lost traction and slid down to the deck. Stepping back in close, the Ultramarine brought his elbow around in a perfectly timed strike that hit Burias square in the faceplate as he staggered into it.

The force of the blow dropped him onto his back, hard. He lay there, momentarily dazed. One of his visor's lenses had cracked, and his faceplate was visibly buckled.

Without pausing, the Ultramarine rounded on Marduk, but the Word Bearer was upon him before he could fire, slamming into him with a lowered shoulder. The armoured impact lifted the Ultramarine off his feet and drove him into a stabilising pylon, which gave a groan of tortured metal as it was wrenched out of shape. The Ultramarine's weapon clattered to the floor and Marduk kicked it away, sending it skidding across the deck.

The legionary recovered quickly. He grabbed Marduk and pulled him into a knee strike that took him in the midsection. The force of the blow would have broken a lesser being – that was clearly what the warrior had been trained for, not the killing of other Space Marines. Until this day, the merest thought of such a thing would have been beyond his dim comprehension.

But not for Marduk.

He had killed Space Marines before. *Battle-brothers of his own Legion, no less.*

Still, the Ultramarine was a fast learner, as were all the warriors of Ultramar; they were not to be underestimated. Another sharp knee sent a hairline fracture splintering up Marduk's breastplate, and integrity warnings flashed within his helm. Rising fast, he struck the Ultramarine under the chin with his bolter, snapping his head back sharply.

The legionary reeled, and Marduk had a clear shot, but even as he squeezed the trigger the Ultramarine slapped the weapon aside. The report was deafening, but the bolt missed, slicing past the Ultramarine's smooth faceplate.

The veteran XIII Legion warrior had a hold of Marduk's bolter then, and he disarmed him with a vicious twist of the weapon's grip. He planted a boot squarely in Marduk's chest, sending him stumbling backwards, and took aim with the bolter.

Behind him, a chainsword revved.

The Ultramarine spun, turning aside from the murderous, decapitating strike from Burias. He avoided another wild blow and planted a fist into Burias's already damaged helmet. Sparks danced across the shattered faceplate. The stolen bolter came up again.

Marduk grappled him, wrapping an arm around his neck. In his other hand he held a blade – not a combat blade, but his sacred athame, its hilt wrapped in copper wire. The Ultramarine dropped the bolter, grasping at Marduk's arm, but the Word Bearer's grip was like iron.

'The gods will feast on your soul, son of Ultramar,' Marduk hissed.

'*There... are... no... gods*!' the stricken legionary choked.

'You've been lied to,' said Marduk, 'but you'll know the truth soon enough.'

He wrenched the Ultramarine's blue helmet to the side, exposing the vulnerable fibre-bundles and cabling behind the gorget, and rammed his blade in.

The Ultramarine was not dead, though he was as good as.

Joint servos and interlocking gears whined as he continually struggled to rise. His strength was all but gone, and Marduk kept him pinned to the deck, one foot pressing down hard against his breastplate.

Blood had pooled. It was already congealing, turning the deck into a sticky, clinging quagmire. It

continued to flow sluggishly from the Ultramarine's wounded neck. Even the hyper-coagulants in his bloodstream were unable to seal the cut that Marduk's athame had made.

He writhed weakly, gauntleted fingertips twitching.

'What are you doing?' demanded Burias. The novitiate still hovered at Marduk's shoulder, casting nervous glances up and down the corridor outside as the sounds of battle rang through the platform's superstructure. 'Just kill him.'

'Wait,' said Marduk.

'For what?'

'I want to try something,' said Marduk. 'Watch. Learn.'

He took his boot off the Ultramarine's chest. The breastplate groaned at the release in pressure. The legionary tried to push himself upright, lifting himself on one shaking, faltering arm. Marduk kicked it out from under him, and he fell back to the deck with a crash of ceramite on metal.

Kneeling, he cradled the Ultramarine's crested blue helm in his hands. Disengaging the locking seals, he removed the helmet with a hiss of venting air pressure and placed it to one side.

The warrior's face was an unhealthy, ghostly pallor. What little colour remained was being drawn out before Marduk's very eyes. It made the splash of blood upon his neck and cheek appear even brighter in contrast.

He had a strong, proud visage: angular and imbued of a cold, arrogant nobility that was utterly foreign to one born on Colchis. It was the lined, careworn face of a senator or a diplomat – not a warrior, in spite of the scars, the blood and the three service studs embedded in his brow. Red foam bubbled on his lips. He struggled to focus upon his tormentor with eyes the colour of iron.

'Lorgar... is sending… *children* to fight us now?' breathed the Ultramarine, with a hint of cold mirth.

'I am no child,' snapped Marduk.

'But you are… a traitor...'

'History will not regard us so. We will be hailed as the heroes of this war, those who ushered in a new era of understanding and belief.'

The Ultramarine gurgled something that might have been a derisive laugh.

'You are... a foolish youngling,' he said. 'You will learn... the folly... of... of your actions.'

'Let me show you what can be achieved with true belief, noble son of Ultramar,' Marduk snarled. He leaned forward and placed a hand upon the Ultramarine's chest. The dying legionary jolted. 'Let me show you the power of the gods you would deny.'

'What is this?' hissed Burias, seemingly unable to look away.

'Can I trust you, brother?'

'Of course. Always.'

'Then be silent,' said Marduk, and closed his eyes.

Shapeless things writhed in the darkness behind his eyelids. Amongst them he felt the presence of another – his *true* mentor. It pushed to the fore and the rest gave way before it. He felt its presence swell, testing the boundaries of reality. It longed to be made real.

Soon, he promised.

He breathed deeply, turning his focus inwards. Unreality blossomed like a flower, unfurling itself, and the sentient darkness spoke to him.

It knew what he wanted. It whispered to him, a thousand voices blended together into one insidious drawl. It spoke directly into his head, each unfathomable vowel and syllable stabbing into his brain like an incision.

Feal'shneth'doth'khaerne'drak'shal'roth.

Marduk opened his eyes.

The Ultramarine looked up at him, his unfocused gaze one of pure horror. He tried vainly to pull away. Even with his blunted mind he could feel that *something* was happening.

'*Feal'shneth'doth'khaerne'drak'shal'roth,'* Marduk intoned.

An electric itch crept beneath his amour, beneath the sub-dermal fibre-bundles and cabling of his mechanical musculature, beneath the bonded black carapace that was as one with his flesh. His eyes itched from the inside. Insubstantial tendrils scratched at the interior of his skull.

Dol'atha'lin'korohk'bha'naeth'la'kor.

'What *is* that?' hissed Burias, looking around them in the growing gloom. 'Where is it coming from?'

Marduk ignored him.

'Dol'atha'lin'korohk'bha'naeth'la'kor,' he said. He felt the power in the words even as he spoke them. They made his lips tingle and sting. He tasted an acidic burn on his tongue.

But it was working.

The Ultramarine began to shudder, moaning softly. He convulsed on the deck, turning his head from side to side. His eyes had rolled back, with only the blood-flecked whites now visible.

Raeth'ma'goerdh'mek'koeth.

Burias had fallen silent. Marduk was thankful for that.

'Raeth'ma'goerdh'mek'koeth.'

The Ultramarine's muscles tensed in a sudden, violent spasm that curved his back and lifted him off the deck. Marduk kept his hand firmly upon the legionary's chest.

The breastplate had begun to smoke beneath his touch.

Things moved beneath the Ultramarine's flesh, like ripworms wriggling under the skin. His armour began to bulge at the seals, as of great pressure building within.

'*Blood of the Aurelian*,' whispered Burias.

Bony spurs and thorn-like barbs rose along the edges of the Ultramarine's armour, twisting and contorting the armoured plates of his suit. It was of a design unfamiliar to the Word Bearers, but its regal lines were now marred by a more pleasing, corrupted aspect.

The Ultramarine's eyes were screwed tightly shut now, and bloody tears began to flow from their corners. When they snapped opened again, his eyeballs were gone, revealing only hollows of darkness rimmed by small, jagged teeth. Those teeth began to chatter. Burias laughed.

The Ultramarine scratched at his own face with fingers turned to claws, ripping at his flesh. Wriggling things were revealed in those rents – ribbed, leech-like things with snapping lamprey mouths. An anguished cry escaped his lips.

'Don't fight it, kinsman,' said Marduk. His hand was still pressed to the altered warrior's chest. The Ultramarine's ribs had pushed through his breastplate, forming a crude exoskeleton that squirmed and twisted. 'This is a great honour.'

There was agitated movement in the corner of his vision. Marduk looked into the shadows with a smile.

'The Dwellers Beyond await you,' he said. 'Can you feel them? They are close.'

The Ultramarine cried out again. He was unable to form coherent words – his tongue had become a grotesque lolling slug-like lump covered in hundreds of fleshy protuberances – but the sound was undeniably one of horror and agony.

'What blasphemy is this?' roared a voice, suddenly loud and bold within the chamber.

Burias gave a low warning growl in the back of his throat, and Marduk removed his hand sharply from the Ultramarine's chest. Ceramite boots echoed upon the deck. Marduk stood and turned to face them.

Bel Ashared, flanked by four company veterans, was stalking towards him. Blood-matted furs hung from his broad shoulders. They swung from side to side with each determined, enraged step that he took. His face was hidden within his helm, but his anger was a seething, raging, palpable thing.

Marduk lifted his head high, undaunted. His master loomed over him, an intimidating, glowering presence. The slanted lenses of his visor gleamed with a hellish inner light.

'Only those with closed minds would see this as blasphemy,' Marduk shrugged.

The hulking captain struck him, and the blow dropped him to one knee. It took Marduk a moment to recover from the force of it.

When he did, Bel Ashared was staring down at the twisted, broken figure of the Ultramarine. This once proud warrior of the XIII Legion, his body now vacated by the energies that had been trying to inhabit it, was slumped lifelessly upon the deck – limbs and spine bent at unnatural angles, his entire form twisted into something horrific. It looked somehow even more vile now that the warp-things had fled from its flesh. Acrid vapours rose lazily from the corpse.

Bel Ashared hauled Marduk to his feet, and wrenched his helmet off, but the postulant's eyes burned with defiance and belief. The captain hurled the helm aside and pushed his own visor in close. The steaming breath from his frontal grille washed over Marduk's grinning face.

'Your arrogance and your insolence I could tolerate,' growled Bel Ashared. 'But this is an abomination. This is–'

'It is the next stage on our path,' Marduk interrupted him. 'To not use the Dwellers Beyond as a weapon is to hobble ourselves. We must use every advantage we possess, if we are to win the coming war.'

Bel Ashared pulled Marduk into a brutal head-butt, and pain exploded across the postulant's face. He would have fallen, but the captain held him upright. His feet were not even touching the ground.

'You are a foolish child playing with things that you do not understand,' Bel Ashared snarled, his vox-emitters turning his voice into a mechanical growl. 'Where did you learn this madness?'

Bel Ashared head-butted him again, fracturing his skull.

'Tell me!' he demanded.

'Are you jealous that you'd not be able to manage such a feat, my honourable *mentor?*' Marduk slurred. 'Your mind is as limited as your rigid adherence to your beliefs. You refused to teach me, so I found a teacher who would.'

Again, Bel Ashared slammed his armoured forehead into Marduk's. Pain blossomed across the dazed Word Bearer's skull, shooting through hairline fractures and into his temples, yet still he grinned lopsidedly.

'You lie,' said Bel Ashared. 'None of my warriors would teach you.'

'Perhaps I found a teacher beyond your company,' said Marduk, blood trickling from his nostrils. 'One with far more power than you could ever hope to wield.'

In disgust, Bel Ashared thrust Marduk away, sending him sprawling to the deck.

'The Ultramarine killed Sergeant Dralzir,' said Burias. 'Now he has been avenged. Does it matter *how* that death was achieved?'

The captain glanced over at Burias and levelled a finger at him.

'Do not speak another word, novitiate. I will judge your complicity in this sacrilege once the mission is complete.'

Burias bowed his head in deference and backed away.

Bel Ashared stepped carefully around the corpse. Its flesh was rotting at an accelerated rate, liquefying and sloughing from the contorted bones.

Marduk was rising, his face slick with his own blood. Bel Ashared lifted him back to his feet and slammed one of his gauntleted fists into his face, splintering teeth and breaking his nose. The force of the blow put Marduk straight back down.

'To become one with the forces of the empyrean is something honoured and revered,' said Bel Ashared. 'It is a holy union. To force it on an unbeliever is abhorrent! An affront! *Sacrilege*. Such is the decree of Kor Phaeron himself.'

'Decrees can be wrong,' said Marduk, spitting blood and shards of tooth. 'The Emperor's lapdogs will find that out soon enough. Once even *you* worshipped the Emperor as a god.'

'The Legion has seen the folly of its former ways,' said Bel Ashared.

'And it will once again,' said Marduk.

'Enough!' Bel Ashared roared. 'How did you do this? *Tell me*!'

'You could never master it,' sneered Marduk. 'You're pathetic. You want so badly to be ushered into the Gal Vorbak. It will never happen. You're too unwilling to open yourself up to the Dwellers Beyond. The lack of knowing, the uncertainty – it terrifies you.'

The silence of the other assembled Word Bearers was absolute. Bel Ashared laughed, almost in disbelief.

'I do not have time for this,' he said. 'I will not be shamed in this manner. Hold him.'

Two of his warriors stepped forward, grabbing Marduk roughly between them, and Bel Ashared unslung his axe. Insulated cabling linked the weapon to his armour's power source; its head was fashioned in the likeness of a leering hell-creature, and its crescent blade hummed as it came to life in his hand.

'By your actions have you damned yourself, postulant,' said Bel Ashared. 'Kneel and accept your fate.'

Marduk spat at the captain's feet.

'The knowledge of your limitations has blinded you with bitterness, Bel Ashared,' said Marduk. 'I pity you. You are cursed. You know your limitations, but you cannot accept them. You are doomed to mediocrity, and that knowledge eats away at you like a cancer.'

'Kneel,' the captain growled.

Marduk was forced to his knees. Bel Ashared's axe blade crackled. The scorched ozone stink was strong.

'This is a path that I had hoped to avoid,' said Marduk, glaring up at his appointed mentor, his eyes narrowed venomously. Bel Ashared's emerald visors, set deep in his grim Mark VI helm, glowered down at him. 'But you leave me no option.'

'You brought this upon yourself,' said Bel Ashared. 'It is time for you to swim the Sea of Souls, and be damned for all eternity.'

'No,' said Marduk. 'The time is yours.'

The shadows coiled, knowing what was to come.

Dhar'khor'del'mesh Arak'sho'del'mesh Drak'shal'more'del'mesh.

The voice stabbed into Marduk's mind like a needle. Fresh blood trickled from his nose, and his eyes turned black.

'Dhar'khor'del'mesh Arak'sho'del'mesh Drak'shal'more'del'mesh,' he said. The words made his mouth bleed.

Hidden runes carved inside Bel Ashared's armour flared, and then in one sudden, violent twist of unreality, he was turned inside out.

Kor Phaeron pursed his blackened lips. 'With no instruction, you were able to do this?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Marduk, still on his knees. 'The Primordial Truth itself guided me.'

Kor Phaeron turned away, staring out through the view portal at Calth. The uncomfortable tingling in Marduk's flesh lessened somewhat in response.

Marduk waited for Kor Phaeron to speak, knowing that his fate would be decided here and now.

'Bel Ashared was a fine soldier,' said Kor Phaeron, finally. 'But he was limited, perhaps in ways that you are not.'

A ghost of smile crept onto Marduk's face. 'You will teach me, then?' he said.

Kor Phaeron turned back towards Marduk. Impatient energy played across his skin, lighting it from within.

'Jarulek spoke highly of you,' he muttered. 'He tells me that you acquitted yourself well during the Purge.'

'I did what was asked of me,' said Marduk. He raised a hand to his throat where a knot of old scars encircled his flesh like a necklace. 'I did my duty.'

'And what did you feel as you killed your own kin?'

'They were not my kin.'

'They were of the XVII and the blood of Lorgar ran in their veins, as it does in yours,' said Kor Phaeron, though Marduk felt that the Dark Cardinal was pleased with his answer.

'They were not of Colchis,' said Marduk. 'They were not my kin. It felt... good to kill them.'

'Why?' said Kor Phaeron, leaning forwards like a predator. His eyes glittered.

'Their deaths were significant. They had meaning. There was *power* in their sacrifice.'

'Ah. "Power" once again.'

'Am I wrong, master?' said Marduk.

'No. Even the most primitive cultures instinctively understand that there is power in death. A child ails with fever? His parents sacrifice a feed-beast and beg whatever god they pray to for his recovery. They sacrifice to the Primordial Truth, no matter what name they give to their bloodthirsty deities.' Kor Phaeron took on an evangelical tone, as he might be delivering one of his potent sermons to the Legion. 'But some things require larger sacrifices, something more significant. Famine and plague ravage your cities? Your enemies march upon your walls with murder in their hearts? The sacrifice of a lowly bovid will not suffice then. It is in the human psyche to understand this. Without needing to be told, we all *know* that some deaths are intrinsically more meaningful than others. The death of a man is more powerful than the death of a beast – and as men are raised above beasts, so too are the Legiones Astartes raised above men. It follows that their sacrifice has a subsequently higher significance.'

Kor Phaeron turned.

'And much more can be achieved with the *power* that blossoms from such a sacrifice.'

Marduk's gaze drifted towards the vision of Calth beyond the station's viewscreens.

'What could be achieved with the death of a world?' Marduk wondered out loud.

'What indeed.'

'And the death of a *primarch*?' whispered Marduk. 'I see the truth of it. They are the next step.'

'Yes,' said Kor Phaeron, 'they are. Ferrus Manus will not be the last.'

A klaxon blared, and Marduk saw Kor Phaeron's thin lips part in an unpleasant, grimacing smile.

He had a fevered, hungry look in his eyes.

'Teleport signature,' said one of the dark magi hunched over a console. 'We are boarded.'

'Guilliman,' hissed Kor Phaeron. 'At last.'

'He's here?' said Marduk. 'You knew he would come?'

Filthy light gathered around Kor Phaeron, and Marduk could hear the gibbering beasts of the empyrean – whispers and cries that crowded in through every speaker, vox-link and console on the station.

Kor Phaeron seemed to grow in stature, coiled in darkness.

'This is my time,' he said, rising up from the deck, black vapours oozing from his eyes and mouth. Unholy energies played across his splayed, skeletal fingers, and the currents of the warp washed over Marduk like a drowning tide, emanating from the Dark Cardinal in waves.

'Today is a great day, my sons,' said Kor Phaeron, his voice raised to be heard over the infernal cacophony. 'Today we will see a primarch brought to his knees. He comes to us, drawn like a moth to the flame, not realising that the flame will be his ending.'

Marduk made to rise, but felt a hand upon his shoulder, holding him in place. The grip was strong; it was that of Sorot Tchure. He had a blade in his hand.

An athame.

'My lord?' said Tchure. 'The postulant?'

Kor Phaeron was like an angel of darkness, haloed in terror. He looked down at Marduk. There was no mercy in his expression, merely a vicious hunger and yearning. His eyes had turned completely – the deepest black of the dark spaces between the stars.

'He has *their* favour,' rumbled Kor Phaeron. 'This is the source of all power. Release him.'

Tchure's blade disappeared, and Marduk was raised to his feet. He gaped up at Kor Phaeron, bathing in his unholy majesty.

'Whatever power I have is yours,' he said, eyes shining with devotion.

Kor Phaeron drifted down towards him, dragging the darkness in his wake. Marduk bowed his head and dropped to one knee, this time as a devotee rather than a prisoner. He felt the heat radiating from Kor Phaeron's body as he came close, and he flinched as a burning hand was placed upon his head.

Marduk struggled not to cry out. His skin blistered under the unholy benediction.

'Do not attempt to use your new talents in this battle, postulant,' Kor Phaeron hissed. 'The power of the empyrean flows strong. I will have *all* of it.'

'It will be as you wish, my lord,' said Marduk.

'You are blessed, child,' said Kor Phaeron. 'Today, you will witness an act that will echo down through the ages. Today you will witness true greatness.'

Kor Phaeron released Marduk and stood resplendent as the warriors of the Legion readied themselves for battle around him.

'Today, my sons, you will witness the death of Roboute Guilliman,' declared Kor Phaeron, his voice resonant. 'Or perhaps,' he added, slyly, 'something greater still...'

A bolter was pressed into Marduk's hands without ceremony.

'Be ready, lad,' said Sorot Tchure. 'They come.'

Marduk cast the bolter aside, its magazine spent. He picked up a heavier double-barrelled weapon from the dead grasp of a fallen veteran and squeezed the trigger, unleashing a torrent of fire into the charging horde of Ultramarines as they stormed the master control room.

The Ultramarines were dying, but the Word Bearers were dying faster.

Bodies lay scattered across the deck. The giant leading the Ultramarines was like unto an unstoppable force of nature.

The hated primarch. Guilliman.

Nothing could stand in his path. He swatted Word Bearers aside, sending Gal Vorbak and legionaries flying. A grim warrior in a red helm fought at the giant's side, wielding an exotic longsword that sliced through armour like wet fabric. Some sort of champion, most likely.

Marduk dropped one Ultramarine with a well-aimed bolt round, and sent another reeling, his armour shredded. He tried to gun down the red-helmeted swordsman, but another warrior was caught in the crossfire – ceramite chunks were blasted from his armour, before he was cut in two by the scything arm-claw of one of the Gal Vorbak. The clash of armoured bodies as the Ultra-marines slammed into the Word Bearers was almost deafening.

Kor Phaeron flew at Guilliman, black energies trailing in his wake.

Marduk had no chainsword, and his athame had been taken from him. He stepped backwards, trying to keep his distance from the rush of the enemy. The combi-bolter bucked like a wild beast in his hands; he fought to keep its aim down.

There was a flash through the press of bodies and a blade cleaved his weapon in two in a shower of sparks. The red-helmed swordsman made to lunge for him, but the surging melee kept them apart, and moments later the disarmed postulant was evidently forgotten amidst the throng.

Marduk cast his ruined weapon aside. There was a blinding flash of plasma and an Ultramarine's chest was burned out not three paces away – Marduk plucked a power maul from the dying warrior's hands and set about with it. Chainswords were built to rend flesh, not power armour, but a power maul was more effective against Legion plate, crushing ceramite and bone with equal vigour.

Beyond them, Marduk could see the hunched figure of Kor Phaeron, robed in shadowlight, standing triumphantly over the downed giant, Guilliman.

Marduk saw Kor Phaeron's blade at the giant's throat, and his bitter hearts sang.

Victory was at hand.

The postulant cried out in elation, swinging his maul left and right. He would be a righteous agent of the Word until the end of time. The heavens themselves would–

Something changed. The currents of the warp fluctuated for a moment, before a cry of anguish went up.

The Dark Cardinal had fallen.

Marduk shrieked, staving in the skull of an Ultramarines officer with a dozen frenzied blows.

The Dark Cardinal had fallen.

There was a scramble of armoured bodies, a frantic press which obscured Marduk's view of the scene. Beyond, fires were breaking out across the control deck. Alarms sounded with renewed vigour.

In a single moment of horror, Marduk caught sight of Kor Phaeron again.

He was being dragged across the deck, pulled in several directions by Ultramarines and Word Bearers alike, who screamed and spat and struck at each other as they heaved and tugged.

Both sides wanted to claim the body.

'Help us, damn you!' Sorot Tchure cried over the din. Half of the veteran's face was missing, exposing bone and teeth. Marduk did as he was bidden, his eyes wide in shock.

This was not how it was meant to be. Guilliman should be dead. This should be their moment of triumph. Marduk skidded on the deck plates, smeared with Kor Phaeron's dark blood.

Together with the last remaining members of the Gal Vorbak, Marduk helped to bear the shattered body of Kor Phaeron from the burning master control room.

How the Master of the Faith still drew breath was beyond him. His chest was a mangled ruin. The gaping hole in his breastplate and fused ribcage exposed a pulsing crater of ruined flesh. Black, foul-smelling fluid covered his armour and bubbled from his lips, while wisps of warp-shadow streamed from his eyes, mouth and nose.

'*Quickly*,' barked Tchure, urging them on through the flames and the smoke. At any moment, Marduk expected to be cut down by bolter fire, or for Guilliman to fall upon them, tearing them apart with his bare hands.

Kor Phaeron was gurgling and gasping, eyes rolling in their sockets. He clutched at Marduk, clinging to his robe with an emaciated claw. His eyes bled tainted darkness, burning with a fiery intensity even now.

He should be dead.

In the void where his primary heart should have been, instead a vile blackness roiled, wriggling like a pseudopod. Oily darkness coursed through Kor Phaeron's veins and arteries, spurting from where they were ruptured and severed and dissipating into the foul air. His ravaged flesh stank of dead meat and spent batteries.

Kor Phaeron writhed. Was this was the power that he had desired?

Sorot Tchure raised his left wrist. 'Get us out of here,' he growled into the Octed-inscribed glass blister embedded in his vambrace. The glistening, unliving thing within squirmed as it relayed his order.

The Ultramarines were coming for them, determined to cut off their escape.

Marduk saw his own death written in the eyes of the red-helmed swordsman and his fellows. He would not be able to avoid it.

The flames of the brazier seemed to dim, and the temperature dropped. Hoarfrost crept across the walls. The darkness itself began to move, writhing and growing.

Tendrils of shadow reached out, groping blindly. They felt their way up the walls, worming across the ceiling and the deck. One of them touched him. Its caress was like ice. The darkness closed in, drawing his robed body into its embrace.

A steaming breath touched his neck. It reeked of tainted nightmares and rotting flesh.

The creeping darkness whispered to him, a dozen voices of madness blended into one. Blood began to leak from his ears. The stylus in his hand began to twitch.

I will give you the means to overwhelm your mentor, if that is your wish.

'A precaution, only,' said Marduk. 'I feel there will come a time when it will be necessary.'

And in return?

The darkness was agitated, the shadows coiling around themselves and itching against the borders of reality.

'And in return I will find you a suitable host,' said Marduk.

Pledge it in the blood.

Marduk put down his stylus and drew his athame. Without hesitation he sliced it across the palm of his hand, blade biting deep. The shadows redoubled their agitated movement, crowding in close.

'This I pledge,' said Marduk, squeezing his hand into a fist and letting the blood flow. It hissed and smoked where it fell upon the carved Octed on the bench top. Then he took up his stylus once more, and allowed the daemon to guide his hand.

An hour passed. Perhaps more.

Hell retreated finally, uncoiling itself from him and sliding back through the worn-thin veil of reality. The brazier came back to life, flames crackling, and its low light filled the room once again. Marduk winced as he released his grip on the stylus. His hand was locked in a painful claw. In fact, his whole body ached.

He glanced down at the helmet still cradled in the arms of the calliper-stand: his mentor's helmet, now inscribed with a thousand upon a thousand curses. Not a single centimetre was untouched.

The handwriting was not his own.

All that the potent curse required was the speaking of a trigger phrase and his mentor would be undone.

'Let it be so,' he said.

Let it be so.

++ALL CHANNELS EMERGENCY BROADCAST – PRIORITY CODE ALPHA-I TO ALL SHIPS WITHIN THE VERIDIAN SYSTEM++

++IDENT: Ultramarines battle-barge Constellation of Tarmus, tethered at high anchor over Calth++

++TRANSCRIPT FOLLOWS++

This is Brother-Captain Ruben Indusio of the XIII Legion. We have suffered a catastrophic systems failure. Requesting immediate assistance. We have zero reactor capability, no weapons, no auspex. Please confirm, greenskin presence? We saw noth-

Who's firing? Vox-master, open a link to the orbital. I need shields now, damn it.

[Detonation, followed by severe signal distortion]

Throne, the *Sons of Ultramar*! They're gone. We're trapped. Cut the docking lines, you damned fool! Cut them or we die here and now.

Brothers of the XVII Legion, cease fire! In the name of the Emperor, this is a mistake! You've made a mis-

[Transmission terminated at Calth mark: -0.17.13]

++END TRANSCRIPT++

THE TRAVELLER

David Annandale

It started during his second week below ground.

Jassiq Blanchot was on digging duty. He was nearing the end of his shift. The ache in his limbs from hauling collapsed rock was so constant, so enveloping, that his arms and legs didn't seem to belong to him anymore. For six hours, his work detail had chipped at the cave-in, dragging away hundreds of kilos of stone. The large chamber to the rear was filling up with debris, but the collapse was intractable. He could easily believe that the barrier went on forever. Still, he kept working. He loaded up a makeshift sled – just a plasteel door and rope – and began dragging it away from the dig. The rope worked deeper grooves into his neck and shoulders.

He leaned forward into his burden. As he was reaching the storage chamber, he crossed paths with Narya Mellisen. The lieutenant from the Numinus 61st Infantry was taking her empty sled back for another load.

'You lead a charmed life,' she said.

He stopped, brought up short. He'd just been thinking dark thoughts about eternity.

He was trapped in an underground arcology along with hundreds of other refugees. Over half the system had collapsed, hammered by the earth-shaking blows of the war on the surface, except 'war' was really too weak a word. 'Cataclysm' was closer to the truth. Could a simple war turn the universe upside down, and shatter his every taken-for-granted conception of how reality worked? He didn't think so. That was what cataclysms did.

So there was the little matter of soul-deep trauma added to the overcrowding, the shortage of basic supplies, the isolation from the rest of Calth's subterranean network, and the absence of any communication from the outside world since the warning voxed by Captain Ventanus of the Ultramarines. The surface of Calth was now being scoured by its agonised sun. Survival meant staying underground indefinitely – underground was where the war now raged – but it also meant escaping this particular arcology by somehow digging through who-knew-how-many thousands of metres of blocked tunnel. Blanchot was becoming quite comfortable with *cataclysm*.

A charmed life? Was Mellisen trying to be funny?

She didn't strike him as the joking sort. Her face was streaked with sweat and grime. A long burn from glancing las-fire ran from right cheek to temple. Her eyes, a pale green, were serious. They were not laughing. They didn't seem hopeless, though, either.

'I'm not sure what you mean,' Blanchot said. He ran a ragged sleeve over his brow. The cloth came away soaked.

'I heard that you were on Veridius Maxim.'

Yes, he had been there. He had been there to see the Word Bearers cruisers *Annunciation* and *Gospel of Steel*, and the heavier *Vox Finalis* move up to bracket the fort. They unleashed an interlacing web of lance and destructor-cannon fire so dense, so cont-inuous, that it was as if the star fort were caught in the birth of a star. Retaliatory fire was a brief, pointless flare of impotent anger. Death had come quickly to the fort, the implosion of its core unleashing, in turn, a nova outburst of agony, searing the void with a terminal cry. Precious few shuttles and salvation pods were launched before the end. Many of them were vaporised by the fort's destruction. XVII Legion fighters descended upon the others, predators striking at weak prey.

Blanchot's shuttle made it through. His impression of the flight from the star fort was a smear of end-times fragments. He had no memory of conscious, rational thought from the moment of the attack

to the terrible arrival on the surface of Calth. What he retained, instead, were jagged shards of sense impressions. The bone-rattling shaking of the craft, which tested the limits of the g-force webbing's strength. The shriek of threat klaxons. The light and flame of the terrible revelation that so modestly called itself 'war.'

The hunters had caught up with the shuttle in the upper atmosphere. Blanchot had one clear memory of that event. He saw, through a viewing block, the shuttle's port wing sheared off by cannon shells. For a moment, the craft continued its controlled descent. Then it tumbled into a crazy, cartwheeling spin. The terror of that plunge was so absolute that it flooded all of his senses with white noise. There were no concrete images he could grasp until after the impact.

He had become self-aware again when he was standing on a rocky plain a dozen metres from the smouldering wreckage of the shuttle. He was surrounded by blackened, twisted remains – some from the craft, many from his fellow passengers. He was the only survivor.

He did not know how he had emerged from the crash. He'd been thrown clear, he supposed, by the providence of blind luck. Thrown clear into a world of newborn bedlam. Before him was a storm of black smoke, fire and a monster's skeleton as big as a mountain range. It was a sight so colossal, so hideous in its contortions of ruin, that it defied comprehension. It was simply destruction, the concept given form, and it made him scream. It would not be until much later that he would learn that he had been looking at the infernal grave of Kalkas Fortalice.

He had stumbled away, then, through a shattered landscape, beneath a flaming sky. There had been no purpose to his steps, no direction, and no hope. He had moved through vistas of devastation that he revisited now every time he closed his eyes. He doubted that he would every truly escape them. Somehow, the luck that had deemed he should witness nightmare after nightmare, had guided him to this arcology in the last moments before the solar rage had reached Calth.

So yes, he had been on Veridius Maxim.

'That's right,' he said, simply.

'And you're alive.'

With that simple statement, she brought home the immensity of his good fortune. He felt ashamed of his despair. He had experienced horrors, but survived them all. He was, to his knowledge, the one remaining soul who could bear witness to the star fort's tragedy. His continued existence was so improbable; it could be nothing less than a miracle. He should be grateful.

With a swelling heart, he realised that he was.

The joy surprised him into a response more frank than cautious. 'I don't know if "charmed" is the right word,' he said, then caught himself, hoping he had sounded casual, nervous that he had not. He glanced around, but they were alone. The rest of the detail was at the barrier, thirty metres away. No one other than Mellisen would have heard him over the din of improvised digging tools.

The lieutenant's gaze was serious, unwavering. 'Blessed, then?' she asked, reading him easily and reassuring him at the same time.

So she, too, followed the *Lectitio Divinitatus*. He nodded. 'Blessed,' he agreed. The missing time wasn't inexplicable at all if he viewed his survival as miraculous.

Mellisen nodded. 'Then if you were spared, you are here for a reason,' she said. 'Why would you be saved only to die a slow, futile death here?'

'There would be no point in that.'

'Exactly. You have a destiny that must exist beyond this blocked tunnel. And if you do, then I must believe that so do the rest of us. Your presence here gives us hope.'

'Us?'

‘Those with eyes to see,’ she said, and smiled. When she did, the battle-scarred soldier vanished, replaced by a worshipful recipient of the God-Emperor’s light. ‘We aren’t alone.’ She clapped him on the shoulder. ‘And we are getting out.’

‘Yes,’ he said to her as she moved away, ‘we are.’

He started pulling his sled again, and it felt lighter. It was then, as he saw the first glimpse of a bright, possible future since the war had begun, that / *dark and ready* / it happened.

He blinked away the passing splinter of a thought, but then / *a voice of razors, needles on bone* / he heard the whisper. He stopped moving. Perhaps it had been an echo of the sled’s grind against the stone floor. Perhaps his imagination.

He had thought *whisper*, but that was wrong, surely. No whisper sounded like that. Still, he looked around the space of the chamber. The cold light of guttering lumen orbs played over the heaps of broken rock. There was no one here. A doorway on the other side of the chamber opened onto another tunnel leading back to the main body of what remained of the arcology.

The scream came next. It was a howl of despair, of anger, of frustration, and of unending agony. Insects crawled down Blanchot’s spine. His flesh puckered at a sudden cold. He held his breath, straining to hear past the deafening beat of his own heart, yet desperate to hear nothing at all.

His prayer was answered. The scream was not repeated.

After a minute, his heart stopped trying to batter its way out of his chest. Idiot, he thought. Alarmed by a scream. In this place of suffering, it tended to be more alarming when the screams stopped.

He’d been frightened by the acoustic travels of the pain of his fellow refugees. His cowardice shamed him.

So did his lack of feeling.

He decided to do penance by spending an hour after his shift helping Tal Verlun in the medicae centre. The designation was a label of necessity, not reality. The arcology was one of the oldest on Calth, and one of the smallest – though there had been extensive under-surface construction, large portions of the complex had made use of the pre-existing honeycomb of natural caverns. And though living quarters and support facilities had also been constructed, this particular arcology was not primarily a hab. It was an archive, a repository of the bureaucratic, administrative and technological minutiae that had poured out of Kalkas Fortalice and Numinus City, as inevitable a by-product of those centres’ existence as smoke from a fire. Records had to be kept, history had to be preserved, but preferably not piling up in the way of the production of more records and more history.

So the unwanted, yet precious, information was sent to this city-sized vault, where a skeleton staff of adepts managed the flow of arrivals and occasionally made abortive attempts to catalogue the infinite for the day when someone, *anyone*, would come, needing a very specific taxation entry from a decade ago. Blanchot had heard tales, in recent years, of a naïve curator who had not only convinced himself that stored here was a goldmine of future exhibits for the Holophusikon, but had mounted a campaign as wrong-headed as it was obsessive to make his dream a reality.

That dream was ash and dust now. Ash from fires that had broken out across the arcology as the battles in Numinus City had brutalised the surface, and what lay below. Dust that would gather on records sealed off from human eyes forever.

The archive had never been designed as a shelter, and it did not have the strength to stand up to the tremors created by gods at war. Almost all of the newer zones had been destroyed, levels pancaking one on top of the other, annihilating everything that had been designed for habitation, including the original medicae facility. What remained were the caves and some of the tunnels that had been built to

rationalise the warren of chambers. A few storage warehouses had survived, and there was food that might have seen a dozen people through the crisis. But not hundreds. There was an underground stream that flowed through one of the outlying caves. There was plenty of water, then, to ensure slow death by starvation. There were no beds, and the mountainous stacks of records took up so much space that there was barely room to stretch out and die.

The new medicae centre was a small cave just off the largest chamber. As a location, it worked: close to the greatest number of refugees, while allowing Verlun to create some measure of order as he tended the wounded, the sick and the dying. As an actual surgery, the space made very little sense. Iron boxes of records were stacked up along the walls, creating some room in the centre of the floor, where tables had been set up for the patients. All Verlun had for equipment was what he had carried in his pack, and that pack was the surgeon's last connection to his regiment. His uniform was gone, as were the men who had been under his charge. Blanchot knew, from fragments of conversation between Mellisen and Verlun, that the surgeon wasn't from the 61st. Beyond that, he didn't know what the man had gone through before arriving here. His eyes held the recent past contained behind iron doors. Blanchot respected the need to keep it there.

Blanchot made his way through the main chamber towards Verlun's domain. The records here had been removed altogether and burned, history erased to create a bit more space for the witnesses of Calth's agony. The shelving that had filled the chamber had been torn apart to create benches and other ramshackle sticks of furniture. Blanchot had to pick his way over sprawled limbs with every step. People slept where they fell, exhausted. The lucky ones found a wall to lean against, and the very fortunate had corners in which to curl up, as if becoming a ball would protect them from the misery of the universe for just a little while longer. The stench was a clammy mix of unwashed bodies and the gathering filth of collective living on the sword-edge of desperation. The floor was sticky with blood lying over other patches now dry and darkened. Time had passed since the onset of war, yet there seemed to be no end to the parade of wounds inflicted on that first, awful day. That end must come, Blanchot knew. The injured would heal, or they would die, and that parade would be finished.

But disease – disease lurked in the shadows, and it marched closer with every day the refugees spent sealed in the arcology. The smell in this cave was its herald.

The closer Blanchot came to the medicae centre, the more ruined were the people he passed. To the right of the entrance were those who had seen Verlun. To the left were those who waited. The only difference between many of them was the presence of bandages. The medic's supply of drugs had been exhausted a few hours into the first day, so the most he could do was bind wounds.

The chorus of groans greeted Blanchot as he approached. This was what he had heard earlier. Of course it was. It was the constant music of the refuge.

On his left, Blanchot saw a family group: a middle-aged couple and an old woman. The man's shirt was soaked in blood, and the woman – his wife, Blanchot guessed – was cradling his head. His breathing was very shallow. The older woman sat behind them, propped up on one of the shelving benches, slumped against the cavern wall. Her eyes were open, favouring Blanchot with the unblinking, empty stare of the dead.

He thought of saying something to the other woman, but then the screams came again, no louder than before, still in the distance, and clearly not in this chamber. He looked around. No one else reacted. Either the people here were too deep in their own pain to notice, or they hadn't heard. Blanchot swallowed, throat very dry, and hurried into the medicae centre.

There was an infantry trooper on the table. His right leg was shredded below the knee, bone fragments sticking out like ivory hooks. Verlun was trying to hold him still with the help of his

volunteer assistant, Krudge. The trooper's breathing and his cries were one and the same, an agonised, frantic, high-pitched wheeze. He thrashed, tugging his shattered leg out of Krudge's grip. Blanchot stepped forward to hold the man's thigh down while Krudge immobilised the patient.

Verlun nodded and picked up a chainsword. 'I'm sorry,' he said to the soldier. 'It has to be done, and at least it will be quick.'

'Please...' the soldier began, but Verlun drowned him out with the growl of the weapon.

The amputation was quick but messy / *whispered hisssssss of satisfaction* / and Blanchot almost retched. He kept his grip and stared hard at Krudge. The other man appeared to have his attention focused on his task. Blanchot kept watching him while Verlun worked to staunch the now unconscious trooper's bleeding.

'Will he live?' Krudge asked.

Verlun shrugged, exhausted. 'Long enough to have made this worthwhile? I don't know. Maybe.' The medic was a veteran, grey of hair, now grey of face, too. His shoulders were stooped, as if bearing the weight of the entire refugee population. 'Citizen Krudge,' he said, 'you've been here eight hours. Go get some rest. Adept Blanchot can help me now.'

'What about you?' Krudge grunted.

Verlun straightened up and gave his head a shake to throw off the fatigue. It seemed to work, as if declaring himself refreshed made it so. 'I'm fine for a bit longer, thank you.'

Krudge nodded to them both and limped out of the chamber. Blanchot wasn't sorry to see him go. The man disturbed him. Krudge looked old. Whether he was as ancient as he seemed, or simply aged by manufactorum labour, Blanchot didn't know. His face was cracked and weathered, like leather hide that was falling apart. At some point in the past, he had lost his left eye. The socket was covered over with a rusting metal plate. Scar tissue crept from beneath it all the way down to his cheek. His hair was long, sparse and fine, and the grey of oil-stained rockcrete. His mouth was an ugly, lopsided slash that dropped open on the right side. His legs were different lengths. So were his arms, though they were both long. His mere presence put Blanchot on edge. Even so, Blanchot didn't *think* it was Krudge who had snake-whispered to him as the blade had bitten down.

'Who's next?' Verlun asked, snapping him back to the moment.

'Uh...' he cleared his throat. 'There's a man with a chest wound. I think he's still alive, but there's a lot of blood.'

'No,' Verlun said. 'Pointless.'

'His wife is holding him, and they have an old woman sitting with them, and... and she's dead, and I thought–'

Verlun cut him off. 'Unfortunate. But I can't waste my time on someone I know is going to die on my table. It will be over for him soon, and that will be a mercy. Find me someone I might be able to save.'

'All right,' Blanchot answered, but didn't move right away. His mind was already chasing screams and whispers again. Screams and whispers heard by no one else.

'What is it?' Verlun asked.

Blanchot took a breath. 'I'm hearing things that aren't there,' he said. 'I think I'm seeing some, too.'

'Is that right?' Verlun sounded irritated rather than concerned. 'Movement in the corner of your eyes, sounds that you can't quite make out?'

'A bit like that, but–'

'And when was the last time you had more than a couple of hours' sleep?'

It took Blanchot a moment to work out the answer. He had last slept in his own bed the night before

the attack began. ‘I don’t really know,’ he said.

‘I’d be more worried if you *weren’t* hallucinating. Get some sleep when you can, but first make yourself useful instead of a nuisance, yes?’

He did his best. He spent the next hour engaged in crude triage, dragging in the wounded who looked like they might benefit from Verlun’s efforts, and cleaning up the spilled blood. Then he wandered through the communal caverns until he found a bare patch of floor. He slept / *the darkness physical, a muscle and wave, a tide of flesh, rippling with strength* / and awoke, sweating. Trembling.

He was tempted to go back to Verlun, ask him if it was unusual for hallucinations to follow people into their dreams. But he could imagine how the conversation would go. *You saw the same thing?* Well, no, not exactly. *What did you see?* It’s hard to describe. *And the whispering? What’s being said?* I don’t know. I can’t make it out.

Diagnosis? *Stop wasting my time*.

So he did the right thing. He did not see Verlun. He spent a couple of hours helping to distribute rations, and then he was back at the dig. Krudge was working there too. He nodded to Blanchot, who managed to return the gesture, but only just. It was not, he told himself, simply Krudge’s deformities that bothered him. There was something wrong with the man at a deeper level.

To his dismay, Krudge was on the tunnel detail with him again the next day, and the next. It was then, midway through that third shift, with the rubble still unmoving – still infinite – that Blanchot realised Krudge had something to do with the whispering.

He cursed himself for a fool, for having taken so long to see what was going on. Every time he heard the whispers, Krudge was somewhere nearby. He never saw the labourer speak the twisted, sibilant sounds. The screams had died away but the whispers were now his constant companions, always close, but never *there*, always just around the corner, behind a door, in the next cavern. The same with Krudge, at those moments: not far, but ever present.

The craven way the man went about his campaign was contemptible. Blanchot didn’t know if he was speaking with anyone else, or engaged in malevolent prayer – it was hard to tell if it was one voice or several. The echoes and syllables / *prey, everywhere prey* / twined around each other, overlapping, repeating, building into a choir and then falling back to a lone, barely audible maggot of sound. But he was hearing more all the time, and he was hearing more clearly. The whispering wasn’t just a rasp reaching into his ear and his soul like a gnarled finger of ice. The syllables were becoming more distinct. They were coalescing / *meat for the teeth, blood for the claws, bones for the truth* / into words, phrases. The terror he had first felt at the sounds was now joined by the horror of their meaning.

And there were other words. At least, he *thought* they were words. He didn’t understand them. They couldn’t have come from his mind. They were beyond alien. The mere sound of them drove a spike through the centre of his forehead. He didn’t know what they meant, and for that he was grateful. To understand those words, he was sure, would be to fall into madness.

There was one consolation. He knew, now, that he wasn’t hallucinating the whispers. He was incapable, at any level, of imagining / *taste the worship of their little god-king, it grows and spreads and feeds us, yes yes let him be a god, smash the rational, plunge them into the dark* / such blasphemies.

The situation was clear. Krudge was in league with forces inimical to the divine God-Emperor. He was working to bring death and ruin to the arcology, just as those forces had done to Calth.

He had to be stopped.

Major Devayne did not have a headquarters as such. But, as the senior officer in the arcology, with responsibility for all the lives within it falling to him, he needed a location where people could have a reasonable expectation of finding him. He had chosen the chamber adjacent to where the debris from the exit tunnel was being dumped, where the dig teams mustered. This put him close to the most vital operation in the arcology. If it failed, everything else became futile.

He had dozens of kilometres of tunnels and caverns to oversee, but Blanchot knew that if he waited long enough, Devayne would show up here. So he waited.

About two hours later, the major arrived. He was Verlun's age, but carried his years and his fatigue with greater vigour. His posture and the lines of his movement were so precise that it was as if he had been assembled by a carpenter. He gave the impression that his uniform, as torn and stained as everyone else's clothing, was still pressed and parade-worthy. While most of the other men in the refuge wore several days of stubble, he was clean-shaven.

Exhaustion had hardened his eyes into flints, and his expression was cold when Blanchot walked up to him. The adept understood: Devayne saw only a man who had been standing here, doing nothing. Idleness wasn't a luxury in the arcology. It was treason.

Blanchot's nerve wavered. He almost said nothing. But then Narya Mellisen entered the chamber from the side leading towards the cave-in, and the presence of another believer gave him the strength he needed.

He told Devayne everything. He tried to do so calmly, but he was so conscious of the man's impatience that the words came in a torrent.

He sounded ridiculous.

Devayne did him the courtesy of looking to Mellisen for any sort of confirmation. 'Have you heard these whispers, too?'

'No, sir.'

'And you've worked many of the same shifts as both men.'

'Yes, sir.'

He turned back to Blanchot. 'I don't suppose a single other person heard any–'

'They couldn't have,' Blanchot tried to explain, and heard himself making things even worse. 'Except for once in the medicae centre, there has never been anyone else close by when they've been going on.'

'I see.' Devayne's lip curled. He was about to dismiss a nuisance. 'I hesitate to ask, but why do you suppose that is?'

'I–' Blanchot stammered. 'I think Lassar Krudge knows I suspect him, and he's taunting me.'

Devayne rolled his eyes. '*Adept Blanchot*,' he said, turning each carefully enunciated syllable into the snap of a whip, 'I would not be surprised to learn that there *were* traitors among us. Given the events that drove us to this location, there is very little that can still surprise me. But you are describing a conspiracy so ineffective, so *trivial*, I dearly wish you were right. We would be facing an enemy so incompetent that the war would already be over. But it isn't, and if you take up another minute of my time, I'll have you arrested.'

He was about to say something else, but then he cocked his head, listening to the vox-bead in his ear. The garbled, scratchy sounds made Blanchot's skin crawl. They were too much like whispers.

Devayne touched the bead. 'I'll be right there,' he said. He pointed at Blanchot. 'Enough from you,' he said, and turned to Mellisen. 'Lieutenant, we're needed at the medicae chamber.'

'Sir.'

She gave Blanchot a sympathetic look as she began to follow the major.

Blanchot's shoulders slumped under the weight of despair and anxiety. Then / *a big kill, a worthy sacrifice, now, now, now, he does it now* / the whisper shot across the room, strong / *hhhhhiiihhhhhh* / as pitiless laughter.

'Stop!' Blanchot pleaded, both to the voice and to the officers, but Devayne disappeared down the tunnel toward the main cavern. Mellisen hesitated, and Blanchot ran to her. 'Something terrible is about to happen!'

'Where?'

He didn't know. 'I heard it again,' he said. 'Just now. I don't know how. I was wrong before. I see that. I can't have been hearing people speaking. But the voices are real, lieutenant. I swear it on the book we both hold dear. You said my survival must have a purpose. This must be it. I have been blessed to hear these things so we can act against them.' The words tumbled from him without forethought, but he knew them to be true. He spoke with the conviction of faith, and the urgency of prophecy.

There was uncertainty in Mellisen's eyes, but he could tell that she *wanted* to believe. 'Act how?' she said. 'You don't know where the attack will occur.'

She was right. He wanted to weep. His vision blurred / *a flash, limbs everywhere, a fanged smile the size of anguish* / and in that blur, the truth became clear. 'An explosion,' he said.

Blood drained from Mellisen's face. 'The dig,' she said.

Of course. A bomb planted there – triggering a second collapse – would be a death sentence for every soul in the arcology. Mellisen ran back to the cave-in and he took off after Devayne. That has to be it, he thought. We'll stop it.

Yet doubt ate at the base of his fervour. There was something wrong with the answer. It had come from Mellisen, not him. It had the ring of logic, not revelation.

Devayne's strides had carried him far. He had just reached the main cavern when Blanchot caught up with him. 'Major,' he began.

The officer gave him a murderous look and did not break his stride. Ahead of them, Verlun waited at the entrance to the medicae centre. Devayne moved through the chamber as though the floor were clear of the sleeping, the weeping, the groaning, the wounded and the dying. Blanchot stumbled as he tried to keep up.

'Out of my sight,' Devayne ordered.

'You don't understand,' Blanchot tried again, but then stopped dead in the middle of the cave. He gasped as / *intake of breath, hissing with eagerness, a world-eating serpent about to strike* / he felt some*thing* rejoice in the moment. He saw that Verlun had suddenly crouched, curled tight in his doorway. The medic was laughing, and it was the ugliest sound Blanchot had ever heard a human being make.

There were a dozen explosions. They were almost simultaneous, two demolition charges and a cluster of frag grenades, concealed under wrecked shelving and discarded crates along the perimeter of the cavern, projecting their force and shrapnel inward. Another frag went off at Devayne's feet. The major vanished in a mist of blood.

Blanchot was slammed to the ground. The huge cave was suddenly a confined space, filled with thunder, fire, slashing metal and wind like a fist. Light flared behind his eyes, and then there was darkness filled with the thunder of tonnes of falling rock, a shrieking rumble that buried the screams of the victims.

There was what seemed like an eye-blink of oblivion. It must have been longer, because when

Blanchot opened his eyes, there were no sounds of ongoing collapse. He heard muffled voices, some yelling, some screaming. He could see nothing. He was lying on his back, pressed down onto the rock by a soft weight. It was warm, too, and wet. The liquid dribbled into his open mouth.

It was blood. He was buried under the bodies of the murdered.

He panicked. He clawed at slabs of butchered meat. He couldn't push them away. They were held in place by a greater, immovable weight. There had been a collapse, he realised. He was trapped in a grave of stone and flesh. He tried to scream, but choked on a mouthful of bloody grit. He struggled harder, mewling, reason evaporating in the blast of claustrophobic horror. His fingers hooked into claws as they dug for purchase in the yielding, cooling flesh. They tangled in ripped clothing, tore into muscle. Blanchot felt like he was trying to swim in a quagmire of meat and blood. His mewling turned into a rasping whine.

But then the dead weight of flesh shifted. In tiny increments, he pulled it away from his face. He heard rock shifting. The rubble above him moved, but did not crush him. At last he could breathe properly, and at last he could scream.

His hands encountered dirt and stone. He dug and pushed, and the rubble moved just enough to let him change position. Perhaps that was an illusion of progress, but he grasped it, the sliver of hope restoring a sliver of sanity. He fought against the fallen rock, and it shifted again, and he could move again, and now he was beginning to crawl. He didn't know if he was going in the right direction. In the absolute dark, the only sounds were his shrieks and the muttered grinding of settling rubble.

He fought with his tomb, feeling his hands tear and bleed. Wherever he felt something give, that was where he went. He told himself he was getting out. '*Just a bit more*,' he whispered. '*Just a bit more. Just a bit more.*' He needed the litany. It was the only thing that kept the image of the never-ending dig in the exit tunnel from his mind. It kept him from descending into howling despair when he struggled through more crushed bodies.

The despair came for him anyway. It was stronger than he, and it reached out for him.

Then, as he began to fall into its embrace, the miracle happened. He heard voices other than his own. He heard shouts, muffled but real. He heard the sounds of other hands pulling rocks away. He called out. He shouted with real hope.

And he was answered.

It was still hours before the rescue party hauled him out. He emerged into a dimness as welcome as daylight. Mellisen helped him to his feet. Reborn, slicked in the blood of many, he looked around at the shattered chamber. Dangling lumen strips and a few guttering fires provided a ghostly illumination through the still-hovering dust. The cavern had not collapsed, though large chunks of the ceiling had come away, dropping slabs of rockcrete and natural limestone down from the structural supports above. In the centre of the space there was a hill of jagged rock, rising halfway to the new vault. He was standing shakily at its base.

'How many survivors?' he asked Mellisen.

'Only you,' she answered.

There was something strange in the lieutenant's voice. It was in her eyes, too, which he could see shining even in the wavering light of the cavern. At first, Blanchot didn't know what this thing was. Then he realised it burned in the eyes of all the rescue party members as they gazed at him.

It was reverence.

The truth of yet another miracle jolted him. He had been standing only a couple of paces from the grenade that had disintegrated Devayne. He had been buried under tonnes of rock. He was bruised and cut, but in every important way, he was unharmed.

He shivered, feeling the touch of revelation. How many times had he cheated certain death since the war had begun? Could he really pretend that there was no purpose in his survival? No, he could not. He had been singled out for some special task by the will of the God-Emperor. Mellisen and the others understood this. Now, so did he.

But what was his purpose?

The answer came a few minutes later. He was washing away the blood with a rag Mellisen had handed him. The crowd was growing larger as word spread through the arcology of the man with the charmed life. The *blessed* life. Mellisen told him, 'You knew this was going to happen.'

'This?'

'The attack. You knew there was a betrayer in our midst. You heard the whispers of treachery.' She spoke softly, but her voice carried far over the awed silence of the crowd.

'Yes,' he answered. 'Yes, I did.' His role in the destiny of the Imperium took shape before him. What he saw made him shake with excitement and coursing adrenaline. He understood the truth of his terrifying visions. He understood why he had to suffer the whispering corrosion. It was given to him to know the enemy.

Mellisen was still looking at him. So were the others. They were all waiting for him, he realised. They were waiting for guidance.

'Is it over, then?' Mellisen asked.

No. It was not. Behind Mellisen, in the doorway leading back towards the dig, Krudge stood. He was not much more than a silhouette in the dim light, but Blanchot knew that distorted figure. 'Him!' he shouted, stretching out his arm as if he could grab Krudge himself. 'He's part of it!' Then a word rose to his lips, unbidden, foreign to his life until now, yet so perfect, so completely true.

'*Heretic!*' he screamed.

He didn't have to do more than that. The people scrambled after Krudge, pouring into the tunnel like a river bursting a dam and plunging into a channel long denied. Krudge fled, and Blanchot and Mellisen were swept up in the current.

Blanchot kept losing sight of the fleeing man. He ran faster. The tunnel took a sharp turn to the right. Blanchot came around it, and straight into a milling, confused crowd.

Krudge had vanished.

'He went in there,' someone said, pointing up. A ventilation grille hung from an opening in the wall just below the ceiling. The hole was wide enough for a man to fit through, if the man was desperate enough. No one here seemed as desperate to follow Krudge as he had been to escape. The arcology's ventilation system was an even more haphazard construction than the main network of caves itself. Shafts had been drilled, but there was also a tracery of fissures running from cavern to cavern. It had proven impossible to isolate one from the other. The result was a hugely inefficient network, one that was also a lethal rat's warren.

'Who's going in after him?' someone else asked.

'No one,' Mellisen answered. 'If he's crawling around in there, it's only a matter of time before he picks the wrong path and gets stuck. If he wants to starve to death caught in a tight squeeze, let him.'

Blanchot nodded, thinking that Mellisen was right. Krudge hadn't escaped. He had opted for a slower execution.

'Is that it, then?' Mellisen asked. 'Is it over?'

There was no whispering coming from Krudge now. The cost had been high, but the treasonous conspiracy had been crushed. 'Yes,' Blanchot said. Trapped underground, covered in blood, unsure if he would ever see the light of day again, he had never been more proud.

And yet...

There was the aftermath of the bombing, and the discovery that Verlun had planted explosives in more than one cavern. They had all gone off at the same moment. One of the major living quarters had utterly collapsed, killing everyone inside. The medic had also rigged incendiary devices that had destroyed the arcology's cache of emergency rations. The food was gone. If the exit tunnel was not opened up in the next few days, it would never be opened at all.

As those days fell into darkness, Blanchot felt his moment of triumph slipping away, its meaning turning to dust. The doubts crept back. Mellisen's belief in his divine mission was unwavering, and through her it spread like a grass fire amongst people desperate for hope. She insisted that Blanchot keep to Devayne's former haunt when he wasn't working on the dig. He was important, and, as with Devayne before and herself now, he should be where he could be found. He was living his moment of glory.

It frightened him. He would accept his duty, if only he knew what it truly was. Perhaps it *was* over. He had issued the warning. But he had understood it too late.

This was what he believed when he finally curled up in a corner of the chamber, next to some broken digging equipment. The sound of the work at the cave-in was no more than a distant clamour, and he fell asleep within seconds. His dreams were disturbing, but they were the expected nightmares of shredded bodies and waves of blood.

He woke with a gasp, and / *the strength of darkness reaching in from the walls, stone no barrier to the slayer of reality, and the tides of black sweeping through, devouring, jaws opening to reveal stars within, the maw of the universe coming for all* / his illusions died, hammered to bloody shards by the force of the visions, images that now blinded him to the real world while they unveiled their parade of horrors. He moaned in terror, but he couldn't hear his own voice because / *the faithful servant of the path, he did well, yes yes yesssssss, we accept that sacrifice, but we have more to do, the work is just beginning* / the whispers were back. Louder. More mocking. The words were perfectly clear now, if not their meaning.

Some of those words could not be spoken by humans. They could not be spoken by anything from this plane of reality. They were chanted by something with more than one mouth. Their letters were bones and glass, their syllables corruption and doom. When he heard them, Blanchot tried to scream, but he choked instead, his mouth filling with blood.

Mellisen found him there. He couldn't stand without her help. Shifts at the dig changed while she walked him slowly back and forth until he found his footing and his breath again. He wiped the blood from his chin, aware of the looks he was getting. Mellisen waited until he had a measure of composure before questioning him.

'There are more of them, aren't there?'

'Yes.' He had to resist checking over his shoulder and peering into shadows. 'There must be many more. I can hear them so clearly. I can see...' He still didn't know / *python-black, dragon void* / what he was seeing. The visions had to be symbolic. He shut down any thought that began to consider the alternative.

Symbols, then. Metaphors of coming catastrophe. Prophecies and warnings of what would come if he did not use his gift. The God-Emperor had blessed him with this perception and this duty. He must not lay this burden down.

'Do you know who they are?' she asked, gently.

'No.' So many faces in the refuge, all of them blurring together in a uniformity of filth, exhaustion,

misery and despair.

Mellisen cursed. 'What would you have me do, then? If Verlun was a traitor, anyone could be. How do we stop them?'

'I'll know,' he said, speaking and realising the answer at the same moment. 'They can't hide their nature from me. Not now.' The taste of blood in his mouth was a testament to his gift's rising power. 'I'll see and hear who they really are.'

'All right,' Mellisen said after a minute. 'All right. Then come with me. We'll make a tour of inspection.'

They began with the exit tunnel, the site of the last ember of hope, and so of their greatest vulnerability. Blanchot stumbled as they approached / *black swallowing the rock, the tunnel a drop into the hungry void, the rushing void, the void that was no void but a terrible presence, a thing whose being was the destruction* / the work teams.

Once more, he couldn't see the world in front of him. It was replaced by reality being ravaged by a thing he couldn't name, couldn't describe, and feared utterly. The visions did not last long, but they seemed to be growing in duration and intensity.

Mellisen caught him by the elbow, held him up. 'What is it?' she said. She was suddenly holding her laspistol. 'Who is it?'

The whispers / *he cannot see us, he looks and hears, but he cannot see us, he cannot see* / arrived with the vision. They stayed. They were loud, mocking / *small worship, hopeless worship, where is your god, boy, boy god, toy god* / and came from all sides, but never in the direction he was looking. The words were nails and drums in his head. He held onto his concentration with slipping fingers. He was surrounded by hissing echoes that built upon one another, growing louder, prying deeper into his skull.

If he didn't silence them, he was certain that his skull would split.

Blanchot stared at the people before him. All work had stopped. Everyone was staring back at him. Through the blood-pound behind his eyes, the faces lost definition, becoming a collection of abstracted expressions. Though he could no longer identify individuals, he could read their emotions as if they were signposts.

He saw belief. He saw hope. He saw a great deal of fear that blossomed the longer he looked at a single face. He saw scepticism, too.

No, he thought. That's not what it is. Call it by its true name – unbelief.

In these desperate times, to deny the Emperor's divinity was to turn away from him. There was no difference, then, between unbelief and treason. When Blanchot realised this, everything came easily. He began pointing. When he did, he read a surge of determination in the faces on either side of the people he singled out. Their belief in what he was, and in what he stood for – what they should *all* be standing for – hardened into diamond, and they expelled the accused from their ranks. Mellisen didn't give them a chance to strike. She shot each one in the head. In a few seconds, there were four bodies on the ground, and the whispers had faded.

But they weren't gone. They were scraping at the back of Blanchot's mind, an abscess that would give him no rest until the purge was complete.

'More?' Mellisen asked.

'Yes.'

She turned back to the dig team. 'You're sure about the others here?'

'I am.'

There was a thrill in conferring grace. It felt like he was a direct conduit for the Emperor's will.

The pleasure he experienced in saving a life gave him the courage to admit that there had also been a rush when nothing more than a gesture on his part had ended lives. These were the realities of power. He must accept them. He must accept the power that was the necessary means to the ends of his duty.

Mellisen picked three of the strongest-looking members of the detail. 'You're with us,' she told them. To Blanchot, she explained, 'Word will get around to the traitors. They will fight back.'

'Of course,' Blanchot agreed.

They left the dig and headed back towards the main body of the arcology. Blanchot led the way, following the aural spoor of the whispers. The scratching mockery would grow loud in his ears and mind as he set foot in a cavern with more of the heretics. Then he passed judgement, and Mellisen's laspistol did the rest. They purged chamber after chamber. Word of their march travelled before them. They encountered no resistance.

Mellisen didn't have to conscript any further enforcers of justice. There were plenty of volunteers. And increasingly, they would reach a cavern to find that the guilty had already been identified and, sometimes, already beaten to death.

But even with so much of the arcology in ruins, there were still too many tunnels and caves, too many people, and not enough time. The whispering never stopped now. Blanchot felt a growing premonition of impending doom. Panic gnawed at the joy of duty fulfilled. The process was too slow. There were so many traitors. He didn't understand how they could have infiltrated the shelter so quickly. But the devastation of Calth was proof of what the enemy could do.

Blanchot judged, and judged and judged, and still the whispering would not stop.

After twelve long hours, he had lost track of which caverns they had scoured, and which they had not. The whispers were becoming too insistent, the visions / *closer and closer, the grasp of clawed night, smashing aside barriers and prayers, the terrible momentum of the unstoppable, the hunger of the night tearing bodies and souls and worlds* / more frequent. Mellisen had to hold him up almost all the time now. His legs wouldn't move properly. Each step was so beset / *the slash, drawing blood, of a mind inhuman and vast, serpent coil, constrictor of light and hope* / by the stabbing vistas / *prey taken over an endless plain, the forever-land of bones and savage dying, madness given flesh and given force, devouring life, crunching its succulent skull* / that his coordination fell apart, as if his body couldn't remember what action it was taking from one moment to the next. What triumph he had felt earlier was leaking away. He was trying to hold back the tide, and he was beginning to drown.

Accompanied by a mob almost a hundred-strong, he and Mellisen moved through the ruined cavern. Blanchot wondered, hadn't they been here already? He didn't know. But people moved around, and by now the conspirators would be desperate to stay ahead of the hunting party. Exhausted, he looked at the hill of debris. 'I can't go on,' he said to Mellisen.

'We should rest,' she agreed.

'No,' he shook his head. 'There's no time. We have to find them all. I'll wait here.' He pointed to the hill. 'There are enough of us now.' He winced as / *hunger* / a piercing virulence wracked his head. The blow was vision and shout, need and words. It was a prophecy / *humanity a corpse, dangling, shredded, ribs exposed and broken by the crushing teeth of laughter, the corpse never released to peace, forever dancing to the wail of the cosmos, dead but agonised, no pain ever enough, no butchery ever enough to quench the thirst of the grinning rage* / and it was a command. It was an assault. No, he thought, fighting back as best he could, but he barely knew what he was denying. As the intensity rose, the whispers became indistinguishable from visions. When the words were spoken in the language of the dark, it was all he could do not to scream.

He wiped blood / *a drop a stream a torrent the deluge filling the galaxy the drowning that comes for all* / from his nose. He found enough breath to speak to Mellisen again. 'Split into teams,' he said. 'Cover more ground.'

'Yes,' said Mellisen. 'We'll bring everyone to you.' She was concerned. 'Will you be all right?'

He nodded. 'Need to sit,' he mumbled as he crawled up the rubble. Sharp edges of rockcrete cut the flesh of his hands and arms. He reached the top of the mound and collapsed, gasping. The whispers / *listen listen listen listen lisssssssssssSSSSSS* / sank their claws into his ears. They filled his head with / *why hope, why reach for the sad and lifeless lie when there are greater lies, lies of majesty, the grandeur of absolute denial, the lie so magnificent that it tramples the real with its becoming-truth* / poison. They were an endless round of hatred and chaos. Promises, rants, and seductions of blood / *turn from the self-denying god, tear him down, break him into shards, taste the power of exultant betrayal* / scrabbled over each other. Sentences broke apart / *give me your mind your will your self your soul give me feast give me the waste of martyrs the capering never of dawn the roaring always of night-black blades* / and devoured each other. Phrases lost all meaning / *spider clutch of ripping flesh in bursting eye and sssssssliiiiiiiicccccccce the innocent with tooth of ending* / except threat. But there were / *dark-eye darkjaw darkclaw darkdown darkcall darkthought darksong darkgod darkgod darkgod DARKGOD* / refrains, too. They were / *soon soon soon oh the bloodtwist* / the laughter of imminence. They were the smile / *spineshatterkill* / of a blade sawing through bone. Why, after all the good work of the day, were the whispers not dying down? Perhaps they were the voice of desperate evil lashing out as it died.

That had to be it. That, and they were proof of his growing power.

So was what happened next.

Mellisen and her expanding army fanned out through the arcology. They rounded up the population. An endless parade began under Blanchot's eyes. This was a different sort of power. This was authority. He was sitting with his back against a slab of rock that jutted from the peak of the rubble heap, and it was as if he sprawled upon a broken throne.

He did not revel in the power. Through the mounting agony, he took a fragment of solace from the fact that he was no tyrant, that he was only doing what was right and necessary. Even that much came close to slipping from his grasp. The whispers gabbled with hysteria as the guilty were marched before him. He was horrified by how many people were involved in the conspiracy.

But what he felt didn't matter. There was only the duty to stamp out the traitors.

He threw all that he had of strength and coherent thought into performing his task. The voices and the visions struck back, blinding him with / *the walls of the real collapsing, an avalanche of reason and light smashed into crushing fragments, annihilating all that depended on them, and in their wake the darkness that moved and hissed, the dance of the murderous dreams* / pain and monstrous sights. He saw little more than shapes going by, hearing only a vague din of protests and screams as he pointed and pointed and pointed, his hand palsied with pain and fury, and the executions filled the chamber with the clammy stench of blood and torn bodies.

He was the centre of a maelstrom of hatred, and in a moment of morbid irony he realised that his work – though it seemed like an eternity ago – as a shipping controller had prepared him for this trial. It had taught him the management of overwhelming levels of information and the making of instant decisions. Instead of guiding vessels in the void, he now guided souls, turning the guilty over to the black mercies of the innocent.

War-shattered and trapped, the people of the arcology loosed their passions and fears upon the

traitors in their midst. They took revenge with fist and stone and blade, their fevered belief in Blanchot rising with every jab of his finger.

If he hadn't been the agent of divine will, he would have recoiled in horror from the atrocities that surrounded him, and perhaps it was a blessing that the unseen enemy's clawing of his ears and eyes and mind kept him from witnessing the worst of what was done at his behest.

But no matter how many criminals were found, no matter how many killed, the whispers / *still whispers but whisper-howls, whisper-shrieks, whisper-roars, and the slithering approach of some great beast* / grew in power.

Finally, with blood running from his eyes, from his ears, from his mouth, he screamed.

'*Enough!*'

Mercy, or perhaps exhaustion, granted him a moment of oblivion. When he opened his eyes, the cavern was empty except for Mellisen. She sat at the base of the debris, watching him. The whispers were silent. He could see the real world again. His sigh of relief turned into a sob.

Mellisen stood. 'Are you all right?'

He had to swallow a few times before his parched, lacerated throat let him speak. 'I think so.' He took in the litter of gore and body parts strewn throughout the rubble. Many of the dead were the victims of Verlun's bombs, but it was easy to see that they had been joined by countless more.

'How many?' he asked.

She shook her head. 'Too many. I stopped counting. I didn't want to know.'

'Where are the others?'

'At the dig.'

'*All* of them?'

'Yes. There aren't many of us true souls left. A few dozen perhaps.' Her voice shrank to a murmur, as if shying away from the scale of the calamity. She looked down at the blood on her hands, then back up at him. 'So?' she asked. 'Now is it over? Did we get them all?'

The blessed quiet. His heart swelled with hope. 'I think–' he began, and then the / *slash the gibbering face of faith* / silence ended. The whispers pounced upon him, raptors streaking to prey. They had been waiting for him to think them gone, so they might sink their talons in all the more deeply. Obscenity / *life is a futile excrescence on the sublimity of Chaos, blind your tiny god, strike him down, he plays with your existence for his own purposes, you are nothing, he is nothing, everything is nothing* / beat at him with huge wings, and his bludgeoned soul dragged his body down.

How could this be? How could the serpent voices be so loud? There was no one here but Mellisen and himself. There was no–

He froze. Realisation dawned, with a force to overpower the insinuations spreading like oil on water through his mind.

'You,' he gasped. He started down the slope towards her.

'What?' Mellisen said, the confusion and innocence of her words adding a knife-twist of mockery to the monstrousness of her betrayal.

'It was always you,' Blanchot said, horrified. Had he been doing her bidding all along? Had he been so short-sighted that he had delivered hundreds of unwitting sacrifices to her dark gods? No. Surely not. There had been no question as to the guilt of the people he had condemned. He had to believe that. Perhaps she had been getting rid of rival factions. Yes. There was a logic that would allow him to sleep, if that luxury ever came his way again. He stared at Mellisen with loathing. 'Traitor,' he hissed. 'Heretic.' Then, when he thought of how she must surely have savaged his mind, and of the powers she must have, he snarled, '*Witch!*'

‘Adept Blanchot!’ Mellisen warned him. ‘Stand down!’

He threw himself the rest of the way. She had combat training. He did not. She should have been able to make short work of him in that moment, but she seemed to be holding back. Instead of shooting him in mid-flight, she simply shrieked at him to stop.

He collided with her. They rolled together in the mire of death. He reached for her throat, but she kicked him away, scrambled backwards and stood, her laspistol drawn. This time, as he lunged, she did fire. That should have been the end of it – the experienced trooper killing the shipping controller who had never fought a day in his life.

But it wasn’t. Mellisen’s shot did not go wild. He saw the pistol flash, aimed squarely at his chest. Blanchot seemed to lose a fraction of a second / *save this body* / as though he had fallen into a momentary slumber. It was a tiny version of the vagueness that surrounded his survival of the death of the Veridius Maxim Star Fort. All he knew was that he was not hit. He was still flying at Mellisen, and she wore an expression of stunned shock.

Then he knocked the pistol from her grip, and had her by the neck.

She slammed her palms against his ears. Blood spurted from his mouth, and he understood that he should be down. He wasn’t. He was strong. He was the hand of justice, and he was not to be turned.

Movement in the ruined ceiling distracted him. He looked up. A face stared at him from above the debris: it took him a moment to recognise it as Krudge. Blanchot’s jaw dropped in surprise, and his grip loosened just enough for Mellisen to bring her elbows down on his forearms and break his hold. She rolled away as Krudge dropped from the fissures in the cavern roof, and he scuttled down the debris, more animal than human.

Blanchot turned to meet Krudge’s charge, but Mellisen kicked his legs out from under him. He fell backwards, and Mellisen held him down. Krudge raised a chunk of rock and brought it down at his head.

No. Blanchot’s soul cried out in despair at a duty left undone. Instinctively, he surrendered completely to the source of the strength that had taken him this far. Krudge’s rock was taking an age to complete its arc, all the time in the world for *something* to shift inside Blanchot. It squirmed like an eel, but it fit into his body like a hand / *claw talon iron* / in a glove.

Then / *ahhhhhhhh, hello and farewell* / the whisper smiled.

And Blanchot screamed.

He did not scream aloud. He no longer had that privilege. His body was no longer his. His mind screamed. It shrieked as he found himself in a prison he knew that he would never escape. It howled as it was smashed not by Krudge’s rock, but by the hard stone of truth. Blanchot saw now the truth of the whispers.

Always with you. Always the beat of your pulse.

The words were human, but they were borrowed. The voice was made of rotting dreams.

The thing in his body snapped out a hand and shattered Krudge’s rock to dust. Fingers splayed wide, and it grabbed Krudge’s face. It squeezed.

His mouth shut tight, his teeth splintering against each other, Krudge let out a rising whine of purest agony before the gripping hand crushed the front half of his skull to bloody pulp and bone shards.

Mellisen leapt back, but she wasn’t fast enough. No human could be. A single kick shattered her spine and sent her tumbling away to lie like a discarded rag doll in the rubble.

And then Blanchot was truly alone. He could still see through the eyes that had been his, but there was a writhing darkness at the periphery of his vision, the undulating blackness of night’s corruption. His body looked around the abattoir and smiled.

Work together. Kill together. As we did before.

The shade of a question was added to the tincture of Blanchot's despair.

Remember, remember, flesh-dancer, your help to this traveller. Remember our words together.

They had not spoken. The thing was lying. Of this last shred of honour, he could be sure.

Words through the void, words from name to name, the flesh-dancer listening well on the dead-hope. On Veridius Maxim.

The enormity of it swept Blanchot up. He was carried by a monstrous wave as the memories surfaced and the pattern revealed itself. The wave was rushing him towards a mountain face. The words of the thing were irresistible – when it whispered, he understood it too well, and he saw then that the truth could be as dreadful as any lie.

Laughter slithering around the syllables of thought, the thing spoke the words it had uttered before, the words that had been its initial assault on Blanchot, the words that had been the act of his infection.

'We have corrected vox failure, Veridius Maxim. Please respond.'

Blanchot had responded. He had spoken to what he had thought was a crew, and so let the thing complete its voyage of horror.

No. Not the crew, but this traveller. The darkness they had swallowed, and that had swallowed them. We spoke. I travel. In ships or along the links created by speech, it is all one to me. We spoke. You let me in. To Calth. To you. We have travelled far. We have travelled well.

The thing picked up Mellisen's laspistol. *A task to finish now. There will be visitors soon. More words. More travel.*

It headed off in the direction of the dig.

Blanchot struggled. He fought for his body, and when that failed he fought to die. The traveller denied him both. It made him watch the final slaughter, and then it made him stare at the bodies for the three days it took before a rescue team from one of the other arcologies at last broke through the cave-in.

A squad of troopers entered, their uniforms grey beneath a layer of dust. With them was a single Ultramarines legionary officer.

The humans stared at the lone survivor. It had thrown away the laspistol and sat slumped in a position of carefully crafted despair. The giant warrior barely glanced at the Blanchot-thing, eyeing the bodies and already moving ahead, scanning for threats.

The thing's eyes tracked the Space Marine.

Speak to me.

An infantry sergeant squatted before it. 'Are there other survivors?' he asked.

The thing did not answer the human, but it did open its mouth.

'The *Campanile*...'

The legionary froze at the ugly, croaking sound. His ferocious battle-helm turned.

Don't speak to it! Blanchot's mind howled. *Kill it! Please! Please, please kill it! Kill it now!*

A clearing of the throat. A licking of the lips, and a crooked smile.

'I let the *Campanile* in.'

The legionary was upon the traveller in a single stride. He picked it up by the neck. Blanchot's hope flared that the massive gauntlet would now squeeze, crushing the unlife from the horrid thing. But instead the Space Marine spoke, rage blasting from the helm's augmitter grille.

'What did you say?'

The final dark was coming for Blanchot now, dragging him down into an infinite abyss of teeth and despair. And the screams. The screams returning in the full force of truth: the eternal screams of the

crew of the *Campanile*.

His body kept grinning.

‘So pleased to finally speak with you, my lord,’ it said to the Legion warrior.

So very pleased.

The death of hope. That is what the XVII Legion tried to achieve, and they came close – so very close. The citizens of Calth were innocent bystanders in a war that they had no hope of understanding, and yet they suffered worst of all.

But hope did not die. In the shadowed caverns beneath the ravaged surface, those of us who were left regrouped and continued the fight. We all knew that as long as we held out, the XVII had failed in their primary goal: they did not break the people of Calth. Far from it, in fact.

Hope clung to life in the caverns like a beacon, and a beacon always burns most brightly in the darkest depths of night. That seems an appropriate analogy, given what was yet to come.

A DEEPER DARKNESS

Rob Sanders

I shake the bolt round about the inside of my armoured fist. Like a die, it rattles. Like a die, it awaits an outcome. An outcome unknowable in the enclosed space of my gauntlet, a realisation it can find only in the breech of the pistol that sits brusque and empty upon my belt. I feel its inevitability, hot in my grasp, as though it might burn a hole through my ceramite palm. Heavy with the impending doom it carries, the round is a waiting demonstration of form and function – it *aches* perfection. Like the Ultramarines themselves, it was crafted for one purpose: to take life.

Who am I to deny such imminence? Who am I?

My name – for all that it matters – is Hylas Pelion. My brothers call me 'Pelion the Lesser', for there have been others of that name who have done more to earn their place in our Legion's history. My achievements are many, but I stand pauldron to pauldron with champions and heroes every day, for Guilliman's sons are blessed with many honours and a victorious tradition. My pistol has consigned many a xenos abomination to death; the edge of my blade is the world's end to all who refuse the Emperor's beneficent offer of unification. For my small part in the Imperium's rebuilding, I have earned the Chapter rank of Honorarius.

My Chapter Master died in defence of noble Calth. Sergeant Arcadas leads those left of the 82nd Company as I forge ahead with my blade, cutting a path through new enemies. Brother Molossus bears the company's tattered standard. There is little room to manoeuvre the mighty banner in the cragged confines of Calth's labyrinthine arcologies, but this matters little to Molossus. The standard is a part of him, the most honourable part, it seems – like so many who carry such a burden, he would rather lose the arm that bears the banner than the banner itself.

Fighting from the front, we have taken the arcology known as Tantoraem. Arcology Magnesi had been our shelter from the solar storm – the cool darkness of the rocky enclave was a subterranean womb, where the indomitable people of Calth might begin again. The sunblind and the scarred, the scorched and the marked, they refused the let the blessed memory of their home world die.

Calth lived on. This tiny corner of Ultramar endured.

Over time, columned caverns became centres of basic industry and food production. Winding catacombs became thoroughfares, lined with improvised habs and grottos. Archways became sentry posts and vaulted caves housed the reverential masses, who gathered to give thanks to the Legiones Astartes – Guilliman's sons, the Ultramarines who had stayed behind. It mattered not that we too had been left behind on ailing Calth. Our presence alone seemed to give the survivors hope and purpose. They shared our determination to fight for what was left of their world.

Our number fought on, as we were bred to do. The battle for Calth descended into an underground war. The enemy was the same: our Word Bearer cousins, carrying with them a hatred unsought and the shame of our fraternal failure. They had become dark beacons to weak-minded multitudes, and held congress with *daemons*. A new camaraderie to replace the old, perhaps? The stakes were the same and had never been higher. We fought for the bodies and souls of our small empire. We were the shield upon which the enemy smashed itself, desperate for innocent blood.

In defence of that blood, we took our fight into the depths – to the arcologies and the darkness beyond. We crafted the saviour stone of our havens into watchposts, tactical redoubts and the Arcropolis – the Ultramarines fort that dominated the dome-primaris of the Magnesi system.

Our conquering instinct – an irrepressible genetic trait – took us through the rubble, smoke and ruin. As ever, my sword led the way, since ammunition for our ranged weapons was by now precious

and scarce. It took me and my brothers into the Thurcyon and Edanthe arcologies. The battles were bloody and the tunnels confined, with sword and combat shield the order of both day and night. Like a blue torrent through the foe-choked branches and systems, we battered and stabbed our way to untidy victories.

Thurcyon held for us Dusa Dactyl, the Kreedstress of the Edictae-Ghuul. Her cultist maniacs worshipped their Word Bearer overlords – for them it was a dubious yet all-encompassing honour, securing them a martyr's place in some after-hell of their own devising.

Edanthe was a nightmare. A nest of otherworldly beasts, summoned to do our former kinsmen's bidding. What they lacked in the cultists' suicidal fanaticism, they more than made up for with murderous savagery. Things of every shape and size, monsters of fang and flame and horn and scale. Creatures crafted of whim. Some were death-dealing creations of infernal perfection while others were unshapely fantasies of a disturbed mind. A madness in flesh, forced upon my eyes. I made scabbards of the wretched beasts, my sword slipping in and out of their nightmare forms. They died hard, sapping our precious strength, before screeching back to inexistence.

Cutting through the mobs and monstrosities, we finally faced our dark brothers once more. Their plate was a parody in ceramite; seductive sigils of forbidden lore snaked their way across the legionary red. Spikes, shanks and skewers erupted from their armour, cutting serrated silhouettes in the darkness. Worst of all was the pinpoint loathing in their eyes – their faces were masks of grinning derangement, where murderous fantasies were willed into reality.

We ended all but one, the same soul escaping our wrath in both systems.

A bearer of the word. A trader in lies. A living untruth known as Ungol Shax.

I had faced Ungol Shax on the slaughterfields of Komesh but his throat eluded the edge of my blade. I would have silenced the bastard altogether, if it hadn't have been for the frothing sea of blood and madness rising and falling before my weapons. Cultists. I spit the word.

One after another, in a continuous train of insanity, the Chaplain's knife-disciples threw themselves before him. Each met the blessed release of my blade or the demolishing crash of my pistol. Each death kept me seconds from my enemy's end. When the poison-star Veridian razed the very memory of Calth from the surface of the dying world, Ungol Shax and his foetid minions followed us into the deeps. His raving multitudes swarmed the Thurcyon and Edanthe arcologies. They bred and sacrificed in equal measure, bringing forth monsters from the shadows. It took us the better part of a year to clear the systems and bring silence to the darkness once more.

The tetrarch had warned against further expansion. He had fought alongside the legendary Ventanus on the surface and was the best of our blades, but also had a gift for arithmata and reckoning. He had the measure of a man with but a glance, and knew his worth with blade, boltgun or fusil mere moments into his company. Besides the primarch himself, he was the best tactical mind for several sectors – perhaps the whole of Ultramar – and despite having little to work with beneath the surface of Calth, had created an unfaltering enclave of order, sanity and survival amidst the chaos of war and want.

He was not above compassion either. Those that had fled the fallen arcologies, that had run the gauntlet of daemon-haunted caves and had held out in small groups until they could hold out no more – they were welcomed through the collapsed arches of Arcology Magnesi. Not just the fighting men and women, and those that might be trained as such, but the bedraggled trickle of innocents too. The young, the aged, the infirm and the injured: all were welcome to our dwindling supplies.

We could only hold so much ground, however. The tetrarch's strategic calculations said so. It was better to hold three arcology systems firmly in our grip, denied to the enemy, than fail to hold five or

more and allow Word Bearers and their creed-slaves to pour in, flooding the system once more with death and destruction. Whereas rock and vigilance were enough to keep cultists and brother-betrayers from the territory that we'd carved, the daemon-things were something else. Frequent patrols through our own arcologies became necessary. Screams of the awoken would report eaten limbs and the scamper of tiny monstros-ities into the shadows. Outbreaks of violence and cluster-killings amongst the survivors were ascribed to the whisperings of dark entities. Strange contagions swept through the crowded arcologies but were eventually traced back to water supplies contaminated by daemon feculence.

These obscenities were thought to originate from Tantoraem, a nearby arcology system overrun with Word Bearers and their filthy allies. During our early fortification of Arcology Magnesi, the tetrarch had ordered the connecting mag-lev tunnels collapsed, sealing off the hab-branch of caves and caverns. What had been formerly thought of as tactically unadvisable became a strategic necessity: Tantoraem had to be cleansed for Magnesi to be safe, in the same way that the Fiend of Abydox and its greenskin empire could not be tolerated on Ultramar's borders, when the empire was still young.

The order was given. With Sergeant Arcadas and Brother Molossus at my side, and the standard of the 82nd Company held high above the helms of the thirty battle-brothers making up the expedition force, I led the invasion of Arcology Tantoraem.

Our blades cut through the swarming cultists. Our battered plate took all of the hatred they had to offer. Behind, the fighting men and women of the amalgamated Magnesi garrison – former Imperial Army soldiers and members of various decimated defence force contingents – lit up the darkness with power-conserving streams of las-fire from their fusils.

Once again, I feel the presence of Ungol Shax. There was something about the arcology's rancid defences, something familiar, like an echo of the nightmare that had been Edanthe and Thurcyon. Ultramarines were lost and many among the amalgamates perished. Victory had its price – as it always does – but eventually Arcology Tantoraem was ours. The cavern-complex now lies carpeted with slaughtered cultists, ritually-summoned spawn and the cardinal colours of armoured cadavers – the Word Bearers who brought the righteous fury of Guilliman's Legion down upon themselves.

At the very rear of the Tantoraem system, in the far reaches of the hell-hole's pillared caverns, I discover that Ungol Shax has once again eluded me. Instead I find the remaining few who would stand in the way of victory absolute.

I shake the bolt round about the inside of my armoured fist. Like a die, it rattles. Like a die, it awaits an outcome. An outcome unknowable in the enclosed space of my gauntlet.

I look up. Standing in the shallows of a groundwater lake is a battle-brother in red. His plate is splattered with the blood of innocents, but you wouldn't know. The gore has soaked into the paint, in the same way that some wayward darkness has saturated his soul. He clutches a boltgun – it clunks its emptiness about the chamber with every twitch of the recreant's ceramite finger. The hollow sound of defeat.

He stares into the shallows, his sallow face defiant and fearless. There is shame there; not for what he has done, but rather shame for what he has failed to do. A bitter vexation that plays out upon his cracked and mumbling lips. He is surrounded. Five believers who, their weapons being spent also, have taken to clutching and touching the armoured Word Bearer, like an honoured statue or protective totem. They whisper murderous encouragement and traitor-faith to their lord. They think their demigods and monsters will save them still.

One among them is the cultist leader Seid Phegl, Cognosci of the Red Munion. I've encountered him before, in the dark and the deep – he came to Calth at the head of ten thousand fools, bought with lies and the simple tricks of beings from the beyond.

The Word Bearer turns to look into the lake depths. He watches the dark water lap against the craggy walls, then turns back to the rest of the Ultramarines lining the shore.

There will be no escape for him. He knows it, and the boltgun tumbles into the water. The reaction from the cultists is instantaneous, like a sudden affliction. They hiss and writhe about his impassive, armoured form. There are tears. There is fear.

'A word with you, cousin,' I call out across the water.

The Word Bearer bridles. His acolytes haul at his ceramite limbs, but to no avail. He takes one last lingering look into the lake. My free hand unconsciously comes to rest upon the pommel of my sword. If my enemy attempts an escape, then I want to be ready.

He doesn't, though. Shrugging off his followers like a second skin, he strides through the shallows towards me. I hear the creak of my brothers' plate. Brother Phornax – formerly of the Librarius, and therefore invaluable in his knowledge of the Word Bearers immaterial allies – draws up beside me. Molossus has his hand upon the hilt of his chainsword. Sergeant Arcadas's all-but-empty boltgun comes level with his helmet optics.

'Pelion…'

'I have this, sergeant,' I tell him.

My enemy's eyes are furtive and furious, but they are finally fixed upon my own. Arcadas won't back down, though. 'That's far enough,' he tells the Word Bearer.

The legionary slows but keeps coming. His face screws up with spite, barely suppressed.

'It is *you* who have gone as far as you're going to go, Ultramarine.'

Arcadas steps forward, the muzzle of his bolter aiming at the Word Bearer's face. I extend two digits of my gauntlet and gently push the boltgun down towards the ground.

'Our brother seems to have something to say,' I announce, meeting the Word Bearer's wretched gaze once more. 'Let's hear him out.'

'I have but one thing to say to you, son of Ultramar,' the forsaken Space Marine spits back.

He was fast. He was very fast. A knife – some kind of *kris* or sacrificial blade, like so many of them carried now. It was there, suddenly between us. Perhaps it had been mag-locked to the rear of his belt, or perhaps it had been passed to him by one of his tactual followers. It was there, regardless, blood-stained and sharpened on the thousand souls it had taken in the service of some infernal pact.

It would have claimed my soul, of that I have no doubt – but fast as he was, I was faster.

The Word Bearer's face had no sooner formed the ugly mask of murderous intention, than my sword cleared its scabbard. The blade, light in my grip, sweeps down, taking the Word Bearer's hand off at the wrist. In shock, the renegade instinctively reaches for the gushing stump with his other hand. Before both gauntlet and knife clatter to the stone floor, my short blade streaks around and slices the other off as well.

Moments pass. My blade is still – but ready – and sings with the ruthless execution of the manoeuvre. The Word Bearer stumbles back into the shallows, staring down at his armoured stumps. Blood squirts into the groundwater lake.

His acolytes need no order. They throw themselves at me.

Seid Phegl, Cognosci of the Red Munion, is suddenly torn back, lost in the bloody crash of a single bolt round from Sergeant Arcadas's gun.

'Hold!' I order, such human detritus being not worthy of our precious ammunition. 'Blades only.'

The cultists come at me, and they die. Thrusts and sweeps, as fluid and economical as they are brutal, tear through their squalid forms. The Word Bearer splashes down onto his knees and looks up at me. Bodies, and parts thereof, fall about him.

'*As far as we're going to go…*' I say. 'Well, we're still going, cousin, despite the sick attempt by your wayward Legion to destroy us. It's more than I can say for you. Now you'll hear *me* out – where is your master, Ungol Shax?'

He sneers. 'You really think my last words in this universe will be the answers to your questions, Ultramarine?'

'They will be if you desire a clean death. A death befitting a Space Marine, and not some carcass of corrupted meat that lost its way to false enlightenment.'

'Go suckle at your father's teat, boy,' the Word Bearer seethes. 'You are but a babe in the great affairs of the galaxy and your sire the wet nurse of calamity.'

'Where is Ungol Shax, Word Bearer?' I repeat, struggling to hold my temper.

The renegade goes on. 'Those that fear the great truths of our times are not long for this universe.'

'Longer than you, *cousin*,' I tell him. I nod to Molossus, who has unclipped his chainsword and guns the weapon to a throaty roar.

'Belay that,' a commanding voice booms from behind us.

I turn. Through the gloom strides the tetrarch himself. Tauro Nicodemus – Prince of Saramanth, Tetrarch of Ultramar, Champion of Roboute Guilliman himself – now, lowly master of Arcology Magnesi. However, this does not prevent Nicodemus from presenting himself with a more regal bearing. His plate is polished to perfection. His weapons gleam care and lethal proficiency. The plume of his helm, clutched under one armoured arm matches his pteruges and scarlet mantle. The cloak follows him like a river of blood, through the damp darkness of the caves, flapping aside to reveal the bejewelled Crux Aureas – the mark of a champion.

To the unknowing eye, such ceremony might appear as an exercise in vanity. Serfs and seneschals should have more important duties to attend to in times of war than lacquering the filigree of their tetrarch's pauldrons. As in all things, Nicodemus has prioritised strategy over self-importance. Like the arcology itself, men's souls required fortification. The people of Calth – decimated and returned to the mean existence of survival underground – need a symbol of pride and defiance. There are no better symbols of Ultramar's superiority and grandeur in the face of catastrophe than the Legiones Astartes themselves. Nicodemus needs them to feel that dignity and worth, to know that they are so much, despite having so little. There is still a war to be fought, and the tetrarch cannot allow the emptiness of men's hearts to fill with defeat, for then the war would be lost before it had even begun.

Nicodemus has been blessed with the primarch's eyes, and I find the familiar, reproving gaze of Guilliman upon me.

'The Seventeenth Legion are our cousins no more,' the tetrarch says, marching up and flanked by two honour guards. He passes his helmet on and holds out his gleaming gauntlets. The first Ultramarine places a master-crafted bolt pistol in his hand; the other a magazine of precious ammunition. 'They are the heralds of their own oblivion. Their words hold no interest for us. The only deed to warrant our attention is their death, and we shall be the instrument thereof.'

Tauro Nicodemus steps up to the kneeling Word Bearer. The renegade goes to speak but the tetrarch puts a single bolt through his skull before the words escape his cracked lips. The shot echoes about the cave.

'Am I understood?' he asks.

'Yes, tetrarch,' the Ultramarines answer in unison.

Nicodemus nods. ‘Sergeant Arcadas.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘The 82nd Company’s work here is done,’ he says. ‘Have your men gather what ammunition remains – rounds, flasks and power packs. Collect it bolt by bolt, if you have to. Anything we can send back at these armoured mongrels upon their return. Leave everything else to rot.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Arcadas, Molossus and the Ultramarines go to disperse.

‘Tetrarch,’ I say.

‘Speak,’ Nicodemus replies, the word knowing and heavy. Molossus hovers with his tattered banner, while the sergeant searches the corpse-plate of a nearby Word Bearer, watching the storm between his masters quietly unfold.

‘Would it not further the Legion’s interest to hold this arcology?’ I ask. ‘If we abandon it, won’t the enemy return over time to threaten our security once more?’

‘I forgive you your conquering spirit, brother,’ Nicodemus says, ‘for it burns as bright as any in Ultramar. The time for empire building will come, trust me, but we are not building empires *here*. This is attrition. This is survival. We look to more than just the Legion’s interests. The people come first. We were bred in service of humanity, not to simply gratify our own warrior desires.’

‘Ungol Shax was here,’ I counter. ‘He will be a threat to the people and their survival until we end him.’

‘So you would clear out arcology after arcology in your search for this one enemy, building a guttering empire in the darkness as you go,’ the tetrarch says. ‘What of the other diseased minds that will prey upon our vulnerability in the meantime? We don’t presently have the numbers to hold that much territory.’

‘We are Ultramarines…’ I venture. Nicodemus narrows his eyes.

‘You do not need to tell me that, Pelion. We are Ultramarines and we could do it, but ask yourself whether we *should* do it. It is a question you ought consider. For example, I do not know what you expected to gain from engaging the enemy in conversation there.’

His tone confuses me. ‘I was drawing information from the prisoner, tetrarch.’

‘No Hylas. This man had no information to give you. You were pointlessly toying with him, as though you expect to create fear in the hearts of such men with petty threats of violence and the promise of an executioner’s mercy. They have turned from the Emperor’s wisdom and consigned themselves to damnation. They are already living out their greatest fear. Your only duty is to end such abomination, and end it quickly. You think you were drawing information from him, while he drew you further into his lies and ignorance. The only words that the Seventeenth Legion now bear are poison.’

‘Tetrarch–’

‘Enough,’ Nicodemus commands. ‘We will not play their games in the shadows. It is what the Word Bearers want for us, and they wait for us there. You will stand to your post, Honorarius Pelion, and not be drawn into such dark–’

A sudden splashing from the far reaches of the groundwater lake attracts the attention of every Ultramarine in the chamber. Someone, or something, is surfacing.

Sergeant Arcadas and the tetrarch’s honour guard bring up their bolters in a flash, and once more Molossus guns his chainsword into life. Tauro Nicodemus, still with pistol in hand, stares into the dark waters. It is I, however, leading with the short blade of my sword, that first advances into the shallows.

A spiked and armoured shape breaks the surface. It gasps and gurgles in the icy, gritty water, hauling itself up from the depths and over the jagged rocky bed of the lake. The colour of the plate identifies it as an enemy. A Word Bearer.

As I close on the prone form, my suit lamps shine upon a scarred and shaven head. He brings up his chin and sputters the remaining water from his multi-lungs, and sharp, Colchisian features greet the illumination.

I halt in the shallows when I see his eyes. They are gone.

The flesh about the empty sockets is bloody and botched. His eyes have either been taken by another, or he has cut them out himself. The senseless barbarism and despoliation of the Emperor's flesh disgusts me.

The Word Bearer senses the movement about him and reaches out for my armoured leg.

'Friend?' he coughs.

I wade behind my enemy. My blade slips beneath the renegade's chin and rests against his inviting throat.

'Foe,' I correct him.

The Word Bearer finds his way to a smile.

I look to Tauro Nicodemus. 'At your command, my lord,' I say. The tetrarch does not look pleased.

'Sergeant,' he says. 'Where does that lake lead?'

'I was not under the impression that lakes *led* anywhere, tetrarch,' Arcadas replies.

'*Tetrarch*…' the Word Bearer mouths with obvious relish, until my sword presses harder into his Colchisian flesh.

'Those about to die have no business addressing princes,' I tell him. 'Now hold your tongue, or you'll force me to cut it out.'

'I fear you may merely end what he has started,' Nicodemus says, looking at the mutilation already wrought on the Word Bearer's face. 'What are these markings on his head?'

I look down at the hatch-scarring across the Word Bearer's shaven skull. It looks like a grate or portcullis.

'Exalted Gate Chapter,' I inform him. 'Just like Shax.'

The Word Bearer's pained smile broadens. I look to Nicodemus. 'It would be my honour to end this abomination now,' I say, echoing his earlier sentiment. 'However, I think it might be prudent to put questions to *this* prisoner.'

'Pelion…' the tetrarch warns. I am testing a hero's patience.

'The lake clearly leads somewhere my lord,' I say. 'The dark depths alone did not give birth to this aberrant brother.'

'I wouldn't bet on that,' Nicodemus mutters.

I turn to the tetrarch in a formal salute. 'Ungol Shax remains a threat, my lord. His men are operating in the region. *He* might be operating in the region. Surely, it would be tactically perilous to allow that? The prisoner might have information to that end. I request an interrogation-audience, Lord Nicodemus.'

Vexation ripples across his patrician features. 'Sergeant Arcadas,' he calls out.

'My lord.'

'Have your men complete their sweep of Tantoraem.'

'Yes, tetrarch.'

'In the meantime,' Nicodemus tells him, 'have a chamber cleared and set aside for the questioning of the prisoner.'

‘Straight away, my lord.’

‘Pelion,’ the tetrarch says, turning to walk away. ‘Have the prisoner gagged, secured and brought before me.’

‘Sir?’

‘I shall conduct the questioning myself,’ Nicodemus says. ‘Have no doubt, Honorarius Pelion, that if I suspect treachery of any breed or creed, I will order the prisoner ended – information or not.’

I don’t quite know what to say. I watch his scarlet cloak stream about him and follow the tetrarch into the darkness.

‘Thank you, my lord,’ I call after him.

The intruder is captured by Pelion and his brothers

The chamber has clearly been used for sacrifices in the recent past. Splatters of browning blood forms a collage with other forms of filth across the walls, floor and ceiling. What Sergeant Arcadas had taken for some kind of stone table actually appears to be a rune-inscribed altar, loaded with

profane ritual significance.

The Word Bearer doesn't know that he's seated before such an atrocity, blind as he is. I put him down harshly on an empty ammunition crate. He's unsteady, and not just because he can't see. I had summoned one of the engineer crews we used to secure and maintain barriers across the numerous arterial tunnels and arcology subways. Using their plasma torches, I had the Word Bearer's arms braced across his chestplate and the palms of his gauntlets fused to his armoured sides. So there the bastard sits: a prisoner in his own plate.

The bolt round rattles around the inside of my gauntlet.

Tauro Nicodemus stands before the prisoner, resplendent and grim in equal measure. Brother Daesenor stands sentinel on the doorway, the fat muzzle of his boltgun trained upon the prisoner. The tetrarch nods. I cut the gag from the Word Bearer's mouth with the tip of my sword.

The prisoner works his jaw.

'Name and rank,' Nicodemus demands. The Word Bearer purses his dark lips. 'Let's not play games, legionary,' the tetrarch insists. 'You know that I will not dishonour your flesh – nor my own – with torture and affliction. Let us talk as Legiones Astartes, as warriors of a galaxy broad and wide, and divided. As enemies, if you wish, but enemies that both hate and respect one other.'

'You have a gift with words, tetrarch,' the legionary observes with a smile. 'In another life, you might have been a bearer of the Word. Are you sure you have chosen the right side?'

'Of all the things we want from you,' I say from behind him, 'praise and approval are not among them.'

'Name and rank,' the tetrarch demands again.

'My name is Azul Gor,' the Word Bearer says. 'Exalted Gate Chapter. And you?'

'Tauro Nicodemus of Saramanth.'

'Oh, how the mighty have fallen,' Azul Gor says.

'The mighty go where they are needed,' Nicodemus counters. 'Today, I am needed on Calth. On another day it might be anywhere in Ultramar. On another still, anywhere in the Imperium of Man. Wherever my enemies dare to soil the earth with their presence, I will be needed.'

'I think it amusing that it was in fact the Warmaster that sent you to this doomed world.'

'Then Horus sent me to the place where I was *most* needed,' the tetrarch says. 'Perhaps there is hope for him yet.'

I interject. 'Galactic politics aside, I hope you don't mind me asking where you and your villainous kindred have been hiding. We paid you a visit. You were not at home.'

'I was in the deep and the dark,' Azul Gor replies absently.

'Can't we all say that?' I mutter.

'We cannot, *Ultramarine*,' he hisses. 'Imagine being blinded, stumbling about a cave as black as night, buried deep below the surface of dead world – a world bathed in the glare of a star turned from the light. Can you imagine a deeper darkness?'

The chamber falls to silence.

'What happened to your eyes?' Nicodemus asks.

'I put them out,' Azul Gor said. His honesty burns. 'I put them out so that I might not have to look upon your starched faces and the dazzling gleam of your untested war-plate.'

'You didn't expect to find us in Tantoraem,' I accuse.

'And you negotiated a flooded cave system, without your weapon or helmet,' the tetrarch adds.

I nod. 'Or your eyes. I put it to you, Word Bearer – you did not expect to find us at Tantoraem. I think you were looking for your master, Ungol Shax.'

The blind defector begins to laugh. It is a horrible chuckle laced with venom and bitterness.

'Ungol Shax is dead.'

'*You lie*!' I spit back, working my way around the altar. 'It is all you know. It is all you are. I would slit your throat, but for the untruth that would pour from the wound in place of good, honest Legion blood.'

'I wish you would, Ultramarine,' Azul Gor roars back.

I lash out. My blade lurches forward, coming to rest under the Word Bearer's sharp chin.

Nicodemus throws up his hands. 'Pelion!'

'*Where is Ungol Shax*?' I hiss.

'He is dead,' Azul Gor tells me once again, 'as I soon will be too. As will you be, Brother Pelion.'

'By your hand, I suppose,' I dare the Word Bearer.

'No,' he says. 'By my word. You roar your boldness, but sometimes actions speak louder. You restrain me here – a blind prisoner – with your blade at my throat and the clunk of a primed boltgun aimed at me from the corner. You stink of fear. *Fear*. That makes you weak. I need not blades nor boltguns. I have words, and I could end you with but a single one.'

'And which word would that be?' I furiously demand, the tip of my sword dimpling the flesh of his throat.

'*Penetral–*'

The small chamber echoes with gunfire.

It is over. Azul Gor is dead. Three bolt rounds. Two in the chest, and one in the skull. Brother Daesenor's weapon smokes in the silence that follows.

I round on the sentinel, but Nicodemus raises a gauntlet.

'I ordered it,' the tetrarch admits, 'as I told you I would. This is my fault. This was a mistake.'

'He was talking,' I protest.

'He was,' Nicodemus agrees. 'He was talking you into the darkness. You've seen how far the Word Bearers have fallen. You've seen their depravities. That word was likely some kind of incantation, and his death at your hands would have been a latent bargain with some otherworldly creature.'

I stare at the tetrarch.

'We would do well not to underestimate our lost kinsmen,' he continues. 'The entire episode – being unarmed, the eyes, emerging from hiding – it was probably a ruse to get him into a room with an Ultramarines officer. A target worthy of his sacrifice. It is my fault. I take responsibility.'

The tetrarch goes to leave the chamber. He looks to Daesenor and nods at the trussed-up corpse of the Word Bearer. 'Take care of that please, brother,' he says, before turning to me. 'I'm going back to the Arcropolis. Have Sergeant Arcadas complete his sweep and then withdraw from this damned place. Assist the Army sappers in demolishing our breach point.'

'Won't you reconsider occupying the arcology?' I say, but my heart isn't in it.

The tetrarch ignores my words.

'Ensure that nothing can get through where we entered,' Nicodemus says. 'That's *your* responsibility.'

The breach point is nothing more than a ragged hole in the cavern wall.

Seismic demolition charges had been requisitioned from a tunnel-team lockup. They are not military grade, or anything close to the power and precision of the tactical demolitions used by the Legiones Astartes. However, in sufficient quantity – and under expert supervision –the seismic charges would do the job.

Sergeant Arcadas is clearing the last of his warriors from Arcology Tantoraem. With members of the Army, the sergeant's Space Marines had made swift work of searching the cave system for Legion munitions and power packs. All else – rations, weaponry and plate – was destroyed on the further orders of the tetrarch for fear it might somehow be contaminated. Blades were broken. Fibre bundles were ripped out. Bolters were breech-blown or fouled with crude plugs.

Imperial Army forces trudge by under the milky orb of Sergeant Brotus Grodin, carrying caches of recovered munitions and packs. Grodin is a retired soldier – one of the Emperor's ex-serviceman, who has been placed in charge of one of the newly organised units of the Veridian Cicatrix. The Cicatrix had been the tetrarch's idea: Cicatricians are all remnants of former defence regiments that have been decimated and scattered during the surface war. Their camo-chitons are a myriad of local colour, each member hailing from a different defence force or ceremonial guard. All wear flak plate from Konor – breastplates, skirts and guards. Their visored helms display the nose and cheekguards favoured by many of the Calth militia, and each carries a battered buckler, short blade and the slung length of a las-fusil.

Their exposed forearms and thighs all bear horrific radiation burns and solar scarring. This is the now infamous Mark of Calth, a testament to their desire to fight on across the sun-scorched surface of their doomed home world. It was this unifying feature that Nicodemus chose to honour in their name, despite the fact that Grodin's contingent alone is made up of former members of the Vospherus 14th and 55th Irregulars, and the Tarxis 1st Citizen's Reserve. Helmetless, with the scowl on his roasted half-face driving the Cicatricians on, Grodin taps the passing soldiers on the arm with a swagger-sceptre.

'All through, m'lord,' Grodin reports gruffly.

'Thank you, sergeant,' I say. 'Would you be so good as to accompany my legionary brothers back to the Arcropolis with the supplies?'

Grodin nods and follows his dour troops, leaving me with Brothers Daesenor and Phornax as breach sentries.

Ione Dodona also remains.

She retreats, unspooling detonator cable. The three of us follow her to an outcrop, behind which she has set up a simple plunge-detonator. The equipment is only frontier mining-standard, but serviceable – like the seismic charges Dodona is using to collapse the breach point.

'Are we set?' I ask.

'Two more charges to wire,' she answers, fingering through the nest of cable. 'One more minute.'

Dodona has been invaluable. Grodin's men have heart and grim determination but they are all topsiders. As a Sapper Second-Class, even before the conflict, Dodona had been part of the Calth Pioneer Auxilia. Commonly known as 'the Benthals', the sappers' expert knowledge of the cave systems, structural integrities and explosives became a powerful weapon in the war as it progressed beyond a simply military endeavour. Many lives and much in the way of precious ammunition have been saved by the strategic collapsing of caves and tunnels swarming with cultist forces and degenerate Word Bearers.

Collectively, Dodona possibly has a higher kill-count than some frontline battle-brothers. What they achieve with bolt and blade, the sappers accomplished with millions of tonnes of rock. In a way, Calth itself has taken the fight to the invaders.

As we wait, Daesenor and Phornax monitor the breach for enemy activity. Without the opportunity to carry out a full survey, there was no way of knowing all of the entry and exit points in the Tantoraem arcology. An enemy force could stream through and flood our territory through our own

breach point. My brothers' bolters are there to give Dodona time to finish her work and bury any opportunists. As it is, all is silent and still.

Casting my eyes across Dodona's equipment and schemata, I pick up a scratched dataslate. It displays detailed maps of arcologies both completed and – before the war – in a state of construction. Tracing my ceramite fingertip across the slate, I follow the pillar-lined mag-lev tunnels out of Magnesi-South, through the breach point and down through the branching cave systems of Tantoraem. My digit drifts the torturous route of our incursion. I think on the brothers lost under my command, drowning in the sea of rabid cultists. I feel my boots slipping in the blood of our loyal Cicatricians, and relive the clash of our formations against throngs of fanatical Word Bearers, like ships smashing against rocks in the shallows.

Then I reach the groundwater lake, the shallows where we captured Azul Gor. To my surprise, my finger travels on, arriving at a single slate designation: *Penetralia*.

'What is this?' I ask Dodona, who is clearly not impressed at having to disentangle herself from detonator cables to check the slate. Unlike the Cicatricians, her lamped helmet is close-fitting and her flak-plates are set into a dark body-suit, better adapted to clambering through rough caves and tight tunnels. She shines her lamps down onto the slate screen.

'That would be the Penetralia,' she tells me. 'It's a series of tunnels formed naturally in the rock. It's quite a labyrinth down there, but the region was ear-marked for excavation as the entry point to another arcology.'

'But it's submerged,' I mutter, having seen the lake for myself. Dodona nods.

'Groundwater flooded part of the Penetralia and the mag-lev mining track leading to the excavation,' she says. 'Pioneers were evacuated and operations were abandoned until pump-crews could be brought in, but by that time the war had already started.'

'Why wasn't I supplied with this information?'

'It's not an arcology,' Dodona insists, 'it's a dead end – flooded, at that. An excavation barely begun.'

'On the other side of the tunnels,' I press the Pioneer, jabbing my ceramite finger at the screen, 'is it possible that the caves remain dry? Airlocked, perhaps?'

She considers this for a moment. 'Yes, it's possible – but why would you even think that? It's deeper than we've ever bothered to go before.'

'We pulled a Word Bearer from the waters of that lake,' Brother Phornax informs her. 'He didn't come from Tantoraem.'

I hand her back the slate and turn to my two brothers.

'Hold off on the detonation,' I order. 'Send word back to Magnesi.'

'But the tetrarch–' Dodona begins.

'I'm going to see the tetrarch now,' I tell her. 'Blow the breach point only in the event of an enemy incursion.' Snatching up my helmet, I nod to Daesenor and Phornax. 'Vigilance, brothers,' I tell them. 'I will send reinforcements. Our enemy could be lying in wait – remaining hidden from sight. We may not have finished our work here.'

The mag-lev line runs into the lake – I can see it clearly now. Earlier, I had unknowingly emptied the freight car of some of the Red Munion sharpshooters. With fusil bolts lancing off my plate and my short sword cleaving through cultist bodies in the confines of the vehicle, I had not realised that it was part of the mag-way.

Sergeant Brodin's Cicatricians are clearing the bodies now, carrying the cadavers and dumping

them in a fire. The reactivated freight engine hums and crackles its intention to move. The sergeant himself is rinsing down the car interior with buckets of lake water, while Ione Dodona works with a plasma torch to air-seal the vehicle as best she can.

I have faith in her efforts. She has already worked wonders with the dormant electropolar engine. She has spent a lifetime working down in the arcologies on such machines and so I leave the workings and operation of the mining tram to her.

We would not bother with the mag-lev but for the Army troopers; my brothers and I could traverse the flooded tunnels just as Azul Gor had done, with the benefit of enclosed suits and autosenses. The Veridian Cicatrix have no such equipment, however, and I am forced to rely upon the rotting rail system. It will undeniably hasten our journey, even though it has taken some time to ready the engine car.

I am relying upon the Cicatricians to bolster our numbers. When I took evidence of an unfinished network beyond Tantoraem to the tetrarch, once again he was not pleased. He was not pleased that its existence had been missed in the first place, and not pleased that it might well harbour a hidden Word Bearers outpost. I reminded him of Azul Gor's last half-spoken word, and showed him the unfinished Penetralia branch.

He still angrily refused my request of two full legionary Breacher squads to clear the Penetralia tunnels; anger at me, himself or both, I could not tell. He did at least grant my subsequent request for a reconnaissance party – if there was a waiting enclave of Word Bearers on our doorstep, there was no denying that it was a tactical necessity to confirm their existence, number and threat level. This was at least the way I framed the request. Nicodemus regarded it more as a job unfinished, an objective untaken. I accepted responsibility and took the rebuke in silence.

I have been allocated two battle-brothers. I asked for Molossus and Sergeant Arcadas, but I got Brothers Daesenor and Phornax, plus my pick of the Army troopers and Pioneers. I accepted without argument.

Brotus Grodin and his men had just arrived at the Arcropolis with the Tantoraem salvage when I ordered the sergeant and a squad of his Cicatricians to resupply and head back out to the breach point with me.

It's fair to say that Tauro Nicodemus is not the only one who is currently *not pleased*.

Dodona clears us to mount the freight engine. The Cicatricians stand, clutching the long barrels of their las-fusils. Dodona operates the chunky levers of the tram, while Daesenor, Phornax and myself tower over them in the freight compartment with our blades and combat shields at the ready. Phornax and I pack our pistols while Brother Daesenor carries his all-but-empty boltgun slung over his shoulder.

The salvage from Tantoraem was paltry and already earmarked for the Magnesi defenders, and we only have a few precious bolt rounds between us. I rattle my single remaining shell in the grip of my gauntlet, as I frequently do. I hold it a little way from my mag-lock belt, then release it. The round flies to the belt from my finger and thumb, clicking into its usual place.

The tram engine manages a throaty hum that takes us out of the siding and down the shore. The groundwater parts, churning aside as the tram pushes on before disappearing into the inky black depths of the lake.

The hum builds to a whine as the carriage pushes through the weight of the water. The cab-lamps illuminate the flooded tunnels of the Penetralia beyond the rapidly steaming windows – everything is rough, rocky and unfinished. Dodona burdens the electropolar engine. Her plasma welding is serviceable, but it can't hope to completely hold back the water. Closed ceiling vents disappoint,

admitting a near-constant downpour, and water leaks in through some of the las-bolt holes that Dodona failed to spot. The door seals bubble and spume liquid darkness. Water pools rapidly in the freight compartment before crawling up the boots of the Cicatricians, much to their growing concern.

As the water reaches their skirts and breastplates, Sergeant Grodin orders fusils held out of the rising inundation. Some of the men begin to panic.

'How much further?' Grodin calls up to the cab, trying not to sound too alarmed.

'Not far, sergeant,' Ione Dodona calls back to him. '*I think*,' she adds under her breath.

The freight tram rumbles on against the water. The cab-lumens suddenly flash before going out. Our suit lamps provide the only illumination now. Someone cries out in alarm as a closed vent shears off, water gushing into the space with renewed force.

Everything is deluge and darkness. As the water rises beyond my belt, the Cicatricians begin to paddle and splash, holding onto the side of the compartment and trying to keep their heads above the surface. We assist them as best we can, helping them to climb the cab wall to the overhead stowage bins, but soon it is all they can do to keep their helmets between the ceiling and the frothing water. They are coughing. They are drowning in the dark.

'Ione…?' I press her, preparing to expand my multi-lung.

I fear we might lose the Cicatricians, but the Pioneer is having her own problems. She is routinely pulling herself down under the water to operate the mag-lev's manual levers and peer through the front screen. She surfaces.

'Can't see a damn thing,' she splutters.

'Ione!' I shout back. She slips below the water again.

A moment later we are all thrown forward by a sudden halt. The magnetic seals on our boots keep me and my brothers in place, but Grodin and many of his squad lose their grip in the surging water – it crashes them into the ceiling, then drags them back down again.

The tram has stopped. The engine gurgles and sparks.

With a sudden, ear-popping crash, the left-hand bank of windows burst outwards, dragging men and floating equipment out in the inescapable surge of water. The compartment evacuates quickly, but I claw open the exit hatch, my suit lamps providing ghostly illumination in the darkness beyond.

The *dry* darkness.

Turning, I see Ione Dodona slumped down in the cab like a drowned bilge-rat, her hand still on the brake and her chest rising and falling in deep, ragged breaths. Through the forward screen I see the rear bumpers of another engine – an engine our car almost collided with.

I step down from the freight car with Phornax and Daesenor, ordering the pair to secure a perimeter as the Cicatricians groggily regroup. Our vehicle still sits in the shallows, unable to go any further up the incline because of a longer, deactivated train that runs all the way up to the dead-end siding. I stand still for a moment.

I look down at the water, my suit lamps lighting up the surface of the dark lake. The resplendence of my cobalt-blue armour is reflected back to me from the glassy ripples. I wonder if it has recently caught the armoured reflections of my sworn enemies – have I finally cornered Ungol Shax and his Word Bearers brethren?

Walking the length of the first vehicle, my sword and shield ready, it becomes apparent that the train is partially flooded – suggesting that it must have been used fairly recently. Certainly since the flooding of the Penetralia with groundwater.

'Anything?' I growl over the vox.

'Nothing… Aye, nothing,' my brothers return.

Activating barrel-mounted lamps on their fusils, Sergeant Grodin coughs out orders to the Cicatricians to perform a weapons test. Firing searing beams into the lake depths, we discover that over half of the squad's weapons have temporarily succumbed to water infiltration. In the absolute darkness of the Penetralia, with no arc-lights or reflection vents, this isn't ideal.

'Dodona,' I call out. The dripping Pioneer steps down from the tram, her helmet lamps on the data-slate she's studying.

'Three exits from this terminus chamber,' she tells me. 'All swiftly devolve into natural branches of the cave system, with chambers and grottos situated throughout.'

'With Word Bearers lying in wait,' I murmur. Grodin returns with his squad, and I turn to him. 'Three entrances, sergeant – we'll take one each. Brother Daesenor, follow Grodin and I'll take Dodona. Sergeant, split your men between myself and Brothers Phornax and Daesenor. We will split up to cover more ground. I want every twist, turn, cavity and crawlspace checked for enemy presences. We are looking for Ungol Shax and his dark brotherhood. Keep channels open and vox back any contacts. If you run into numbers or are ambushed, establish a hold point and fall back by sections to the terminus chamber. We'll regroup there. Understood?'

I get helmeted nods and a grim, 'Yes, my lord,' from Grodin and the Cicatricans.

'Maintain communications,' I say before leading Ione Dodona and three soldiers into the Penetralia.

Dodona isn't wrong: the Penetralia is a labyrinth. Tunnels corkscrew, jagged slopes erupt before our lamps and the ceiling regularly slopes down to meet the tops of our helmets. Passages wind and bifurcate, riddled with grot holes and burrows. Blind corners open into vertiginous vaults and small caverns form sudden dead ends. The darkness is almost palpable, its viscid obscurity devouring the light from our illumination.

My suit lamps lead the way, the halo of light feeling its way across the angularity and sharp stone. Dodona's helmet beam dances ahead, guiding me through the branching network of tunnels. Behind, the three Cicatricians – all former members of Tarxis Reserve – explore the holes and hollows with their barrel-mounted lamps. My shield scrapes around corners, while my blade stands ready and retracted, poised to sweep forward and take a Word Bearer's head from his armoured shoulders or to cleave down through the torso of an unfortunate cultist.

Our reconnaissance reveals little, however, but the black emptiness of the Penetralia's lonely depths.

'Daesenor, what do you have?' I vox.

'This place is dead,' he returns. 'If Ungol Shax was here, I think we missed him.'

'Phornax?'

'The Word Bearers *were* here,' my battle-brother informs me with confidence. 'We've pushed on to a larger chamber at the heart of the tunnels. There are statues and iconography.'

I nod to myself. If Arcology Tantoraem was anything to go by, our betrayer-kinsmen and their cult followers are wanton idolaters, constructing temples and statues and worshipping at the stone feet of their otherworldly sponsors. I make a note of Phornax's position from my optical-overlay. 'Hold position,' I tell him. 'We're coming to you. Brother Daesenor – meet us at this chamber.'

'Affirmative,' Daesenor replies. 'But I've lost one of my men in the damned tunnels. Sergeant Grodin is looking for him now. We'll be there shortly.'

Pushing on through the thick darkness and a knot of intersecting passageways, we step out into the open space of a larger chamber. I can see the beams of lamps ahead in the pitch blackness, cutting

through the murk like blades. Phornax and his men are waiting near the centre of the cavern, but the light from their lamps blinks and breaks. As I advance, I come to understand why.

Phornax was right. There are statues here, but nothing like I'd seen in the dark chapels and reverence-dens of cultist-held arcologies. These statues are different sizes but humanoid in shape. Each is crafted from an obsidian-like substance – crystalline and angular. It absorbs the light from our lamps like a black hole. Even our reflections are absent from its glassy, midnight surface. There simply isn't sufficient light. This material swallows it all.

'Volcanic glass?' Pioneer Dodona says with a frown. 'Not on Calth, surely. Not in these quantities…'

I watch the dark material begin to wisp and curl under the light of our lamps. It dissipates and drifts away like a thin, black vapour. It is strange indeed.

'It's not obsidian,' I say. 'Touch nothing. Nobody touch anything.'

It is as though the statues were crafted from solidified darkness itself.

The representations are everywhere, obscuring the beams of Phornax's lamps. The Ultramarine and a soldier of the Vospherus 14th are examining something at the heart of the rocky chamber. Statues, many in number, are clustered about them – a crowd of the crystalline forms, all facing inwards to a central point. It is decidedly unnerving.

'What do we have?' I ask my battle-brother impatiently.

Phornax is kneeling. He stands at my approach.

'An unholy temple of some kind,' he confirms, 'seemingly used for ceremonies and communion with the monstrous beings of the empyrean.'

He gestures to the floor at my boots. The rough surface has been smoothed and polished, and there is a pattern etched into the bedrock. It bears dreadful glyphs, and symbols that make my eyes ache.

'Cultist volunteers were brought here for sacrifice, Honorius, and a ceremony employed to commune with some beast or malignificant.'

I hear Phornax's words, but I rarely understand his Librarius-talk. I am a practical warrior to the core. I'm not often interested in the 'material or immaterial' nature of the universe. I believe in one thing: my Legion. The Ultramarines have proved time and time again that they can kill whatever they encounter. All other considerations are pure theoretical.

'So these were *volunteers*?' Ione Dodona asks.

Phornax steps aside to reveal a grisly pile of scorched bones at the centre of the pattern. Sprawled across the blackened ribcages lays a more freshly-dead member of the Red Munion – a woman, with her slender fingers still wrapped around the hilt of a sacrificial blade embedded in her heart. Dodona's lip wrinkles with disgust.

I swiftly tire of the macabre scene and my brother's interest in it.

'Is there anything here that points to Ungol Shax or his location?' I ask.

'Ungol Shax *is* here,' Phornax tells me. 'I think that's him behind you.'

With my helmet on, Phornax cannot see the scowl that his ghastly revelation has brought to my face. I turn to find another statue at my back; it too is angular and crystalline. The idol matches me for height and brawn, and its arms are raised in some gesture of triumph or accomplishment. In one hand it holds a sceptre – nay, a crozius with a headpiece in the design of a portcullis, or a gate. An Exalted Gate.

Under my suit lamps, the abomination begins to smoulder, bleeding its lighter-than-air darkness into the faint, draughty breeze.

I look around at the other statues. It all becomes clearer to me.

Despite the angularity and lightlessness of their forms, many do bear similar features: helms, packs and the broad outline of Legion war-plate. Smaller idols in between appear to be midnight representations of cultists, caught in moments of jubilation and madness. I find my helm shaking involuntarily from side to side. What, *in the name of the Five Hundred Worlds*, has happened here?

I hear shouts from the rear of the temple-chamber. At first I take it to be a greeting – Daesenor arriving with his men. Then I realise then that it's my men that are calling out, and I feel an unseemly dread descend upon our gathering.

'We can't find Olexander,' Ione Dodona reports.

Names mean nothing to me. Numbers do, however, and our numbers are decreasing. I look to Phornax and his remaining Cicatrician.

'Where are the rest of your men?' I ask.

'Checking the tunnels leading from the far end of the chamber,' the former Librarian tells me, concern creeping over his features. 'Soldier?'

The remaining Cicatrician has two fingers to the side of his helmet. He has no contact with the missing troopers. He shakes his head.

'All units, report in,' I call across the vox.

Squad members present within the temple-chamber swiftly acknowledge my request. A haunting static stands proxy for the rest. 'Daesenor, report,' I insist.

Nothing.

I stride to the edge of the statues.

'The enemy are playing games in the dark,' I hiss through gritted teeth, my gauntlets creaking about the hilt of my sword, and my combat shield. 'Form up,' I order. 'Stick together. Phornax – take point.'

The Ultramarine gives me a lingering glance. That's what Phornax does. Beyond the eerie nature of his former calling, he has a dislikeable habit of questioning orders without the forthright nature of actually *doing so*. He allows the silence to ask the questions. It is within the shallow soil of his breaks and pauses that the seeds of doubt take root. Then, like weeds growing up between marble slabs, his misgivings rapidly spread to others.

But before I have to repeat myself, he has holstered his pistol and has his sword and shield ready. He replaces his helmet and strides away from the forest of statues. His optical-overlays lead him towards one of the chamber's many craggy exits, taking us towards the coordinates of Brother Daesenor's last vox-transmission. I motion Dodona and the troopers after him.

'Name?' I say to Phornax's remaining Cicatrician.

'Evanz, my lord,' he replies. 'Vospherous 14th.'

I can hear the fear in his voice. Like a fortification on trembling foundations, the soldier's nerve will only hold so long. I have seen the common fighting men of the Imperium break under the fearful circumstances of explorative warfare and crusading. Facing the unknown enemies of the galaxy – technological abominations, deviant isolationists, or the horrors of the xenos – I have known soldiers lose control of their minds and bodies.

'Evanz of the Vospherous 14th,' I say. My voice comes at him like a wall, strong and unshakable. I attempt to lend him a little of my fortitude and fearlessness. 'I want you to watch our rear. You see anything creeping up behind us, and I want to know about it. Understood, soldier?'

The Cicatrician makes a show of priming his fusil and bringing the weapon close in at his flak-armoured shoulder.

'By my honour, Lord Pelion.'

As we negotiate the twisted darkness of the Penetralia, I feel the jagged passages closing in about

me. My mind drifts to the millions of tonnes of rock above my helmet. Suddenly, the labyrinthine tunnels themselves seem threatening – twisting and turning, rising and falling. Several times we seem to double back on ourselves, and I imagine the passageways like a knot of writhing serpents. There are dead ends and cavities around every corner, necessitating routine forays through tight apertures and shadowy side tunnels.

Several times my hearts quicken at the announcement of supposed enemy targets. I hunger for our foe. Perhaps we had found the shadow-corpse of Ungol Shax… or perhaps not. If his Bearers of the Word still haunt the passageways of the Penetralia, then they shall be mine. I have pledged my blade to their ending. This is a task unfinished. A mission without completion.

But time after time, our enemy targets turn out to be shadows and silhouettes, cast by our own light – the very bedrock playing with us. The Cicatricians beg our pardon, but it is not difficult to see how the depths are rattling them. The scar tissue of their faces is taught with tension, their mouths unsmiling, their eyes peering through the slits of their helmets with dread expectation.

'Lord Pelion!' Evanz erupts. Such a warning had been sitting on the soldier's sun-scalded lips since entering the tunnel complex.

I turn, half-expecting another false alarm, but like the Cicatrician, I catch the shadow and its movement. *Rocks don't move*.

Before I can stop him, Evanz plucks off several las-bolts from his fusil. Light from the blasts ripples back down the passage, throwing more fleeting shadows along the rugged walls.

Something retreats.

Flushed with the validity of his sighting – his fear moment-arily forgotten and a tension-fuelled rage taking over – the soldier charges off after his shots with a roar.

'*Hold*!' I shout, but Evanz is already disappearing into the darkness. 'Hold your positions!' I bark back at the rest of the group before setting off after him.

It doesn't take me long to catch up, my armoured strides taking me with confidence back down the rough passage. I find him at an uneven crossroads – one I don't recall passing through. Evanz's helmet is off. He's young, but his flesh is sun-scarred, lined with age and anxiety. He holds his empty fusil slackly at his side and his chest rises and falls beneath his plas-fibre breastplate. He stares with hollow eyes, but each of the passages offer nothing but fearful gloom.

He stiffens as I move him to one side. I scan the rocky convolutions of each tunnel, cycling through different optic spectra. Nothing.

'Back to the group,' I order. Evanz stands transfixed by the empty obscurity. 'Now!' I growl.

The soldier turns, deflated, and starts trudging back up towards his Cicatrix compatriots. I give the crossroads a last long, lingering look. 'I'm here,' I announce to the darkness, my voice carrying further than I expected. 'When you tire of your cowardice and playing games in the shadows, I am here.'

Back with the group, I exchange Evanz for one of the Tarxis Reservists on the rearguard and order Brother Phornax onwards.

It doesn't take us long to find Sergeant Grodin. Like a crystalline outcropping in the rock, we find the Cicatrician – his back to the passage wall, his helmet turned up the tunnel and his fusil aimed back down it. I know little of the work of artists and remembrancers, but the sergeant strikes me as a sculptural study in panic and confusion.

We also discover the soldier he was searching for, a member of the Vospherous 55th, hiding in a small grotto. The trooper clutches his helmet to his breastplate and peers fearfully around a rocky

corner, out into the tunnel. His scarred face remains aghast at the horror he must have beheld there, fixed in solidified shadow that smokes and steams under the glare of our lamps.

'Pelion,' Phornax calls.

The former Librarian had found Brother Daesenor. He could have been a statue from any compliant world, or one of the many depicting the noble and heroic exploits of the XIII Legion to be found across the worlds of Ultramar. For his lethal service on the fields of Komesh alone, Daesenor deserved as much. With his boltgun snug at his pauldron and his helmet optics lined up with the weapon's mean sight, the Ultramarine still looks ready to fire. I examine his gauntlet. His digit is fully depressed. The trigger has been pulled. Daesenor has been petrified in the moment that it might have saved him.

I feel a curse, common and uncouth, escape my lips. A tightness creeps into my voice.

'Phornax – surely the Librarius has something to say on these unnatural matters?'

'Officially, the Librarius has nothing much to say about anything anymore, brother,' Phornax returns dispassionately.

'Unofficially, then?'

Phornax hesitates. 'The Heralds-that-were have clearly developed their sorcerous interests,' he tells me. 'They draw outlandish powers from the immaterial plane that enhance their already considerable capabilities.'

'Gifts like your own,' I ask.

'No, brother,' Phornax continues warily. 'Magicks and superstitious deviancies. Augmentations in the form of polluted artefacts and otherworldly bargains.'

'Could these perversities be responsible for these dark deeds?'

'Yes, brother.'

'And what weapons do we have to combat such deviancy?' I ask.

'You have my bolt and blade, as you have always done.'

I stare at him, and he stares back. Dodona looks on with some trepidation.

'I'll take point,' I tell him, pushing past. As our pauldrons scrape in the confines of the tunnel, I'm sure he can sense my frustration. He doesn't have to be witch-kin to do that.

Leading with my sword and shield, I move from corner to craggy corner, peering around with lamp and optics. As my light reaches down the tunnel lengths and through rocky corkscrew paths, I feel doubt infecting my thoughts. The desire to bring my enemy to battle can be heard in the grit-pulverising economy of my steps, in the fluid caution of rehearsed manoeuvres and positioning. The creak of my gauntlet about my weapons. Muscle and plate hydraulics primed to strike.

I want my enemy dead. Such need burns with perfect execution. No mistakes. The enemy will not benefit from my silent vexation.

At the same time I cannot indulge untruths. Finding Daesenor was unnerving: if a battle-brother of his skill had nothing to combat the dread powers of our Word Bearer foes, then there is little that my blade has to offer. I drew blood, fast and first, from the cheek of Deucalius of Prandium in a duel of honour. Draegal – the Cardinal-Crimson – lost helm and head to the seething sweep of my sword. The tentacular horrors of Twelve-Forty-Seven would have dragged me into their communal maw, had it not been for the snip and clip of my blade.

But if these monstrous bastards in the deeper darkness of the Penetralia took Daesenor in the instant before a bolt round could depart his barrel, then I fancy the flash of my blade might not be fast enough.

The junctions and intersections are the worst. At the dark nexus of adjoining passageways I feel the

eyes of the foe upon me. The length of each holds the simultaneous, shadowy promises of an enemy acquired and latent doom.

I push on. There is little point in informing the others that we are now hopelessly lost. That is not the point. The enemy will find us. Of that, I am sure.

I hear a half – nay, a quarter-stifled scream, and something clatters to the rocky floor. I spin around to find Evanz staring down one of the passages I just passed. His finger is outstretched in inexpressible horror. The fear is washed from his face and replaced by the ugly contortion of dread and disgust, and then the Cicatrician flashes from living being to crystalline shadow. First his trembling finger, then his arm and armour before his fear-sculpted face, the soldier suffers some kind of sorcerous petrifaction. Like a flesh-eating darkness, the shadow takes him, turning Evanz into crystallised tenebrosity.

The passage echoes with shouts of panic and horror. The remaining Cicatricians back into the immovable wall of armour that is Brother Phornax, as the former Librarian looks on with cold interest.

I cannot let our tormentors escape. Charging forward, I smash aside the glassy darkness that was Evanz. The muzzle-lamp from his dropped fusil still shines its beam up the tunnel… but there is nothing there.

I advance steadily. It will take more than 'nothing' to stop me.

My steps take me up the tunnel at speed, my sword and shield held close to my body. My suit lamps reach ahead of me, revealing the crooks and chicanery of the Penetralia passages. Whatever killed Evanz must be retreating just as quickly, since my light reveals nothing but a dead end, though it soon turns out to be a tight corner.

As I scrape my plate through the narrow gap, I find myself looking into the face of Olexander. The first of my party to go missing, he is in shadow also – dissolving silently under the beams of my suit lamps. His statue soaks up the illumination like a sponge: the helmet, the crystalline shaft of a las-fusil clutched in one hand, the other hand stretched to hide his eyes from the sudden horror he spotted in the darkness of the tunnel entrance.

The tunnel entrance in which I'm standing.

Olexander stands at the head of crowd of such statues, and I realise that I'm back in the unholy temple-cavern, the twisting tunnels of the Penetralia somehow leading back upon themselves.

'Phornax!' I call out. 'The foe is playing a game that I cannot win. They've lost themselves and they wish for us to follow.'

Phornax enters the cavern through the narrowing with the same difficulty I experienced, yet Ione Dodona and the Cicatricians slip through with ease, not wishing to be left behind in the passageway on their own.

'The Word Bearers elude us,' I say, lending words to what everyone else is thinking.

'The Word Bearers are dead,' Phornax replies, his conclusion flat and lacking in the comfort such reasoning should inspire.

'Then who is it?' I demand. 'Those weakling cultists?'

Phornax sweeps his outstretched gauntlet across the statues, set in their ghoulish tableau. 'They invited something into the deep and the dark,' the former Librarian insists. 'Something they couldn't control. Something that destroyed them.'

I can't quite bring myself to believe it. So many men lost so swiftly. No shouts. No screams. No enemy sightings. Daesenor gone without a single bolt round discharged…

'Some… *thing*,' I echo.

‘What is it?’ Ione Dodona murmurs.

‘Something that kills on sight,’ Phornax replies. ‘An unnatural. It hides in the shadows, waiting for us to seek it out with our lights. The horror of its otherworldly appearance alone seems enough to kill.’

The shadows lurch forward as the barrel-lamp belonging to one of the Cicatricians suddenly disappears. We all turn, weapons raised, but the unseen beast has left nothing but a figure, carved into the darkness. Dodona screams.

‘Get back!’ I roar. ‘It’s in here with us!’ Bundling her behind me, I heft my shield high. She screams again. I cannot blame her. She is only human.

‘Lord Emperor,’ one of the soldiers cries. ‘It’s–’

And the Cicatricians are gone, petrified into crystallised darkness. Their curiosity has killed them.

Without thinking, I almost turn to look before I catch myself. As quick as lightning, I grab Phornax and Dodona. ‘Close your eyes, both of you!’

Fear is a stranger to my hearts. I am Legiones Astartes – I am an Ultramarine – but there is something *primal* about the fear of darkness. It is a fear of the unknown that even I can understand. I keep my eyes fixed upon the engravings at my feet.

‘How can we kill it?’ Dodona shrieks, gripping tightly onto my shield arm.

‘We can’t,’ answers Phornax. Though he would deny it, I can feel him casting about with his feathery witch-sight, brushing against my soul in the darkness.

My concern for them becomes concern for all our people, all who eke out their existence beneath the standard of the 82nd Company in Arcology Magnesi. What if such an abomination were to find its way in?

I cannot allow that. Tauro Nicodemus must be warned.

‘Brother Phornax,’ I find myself saying, ‘take Dodona and get back to the terminus chamber. Do not delay. Make your way back to Magnesi and inform the tetrarch of what we faced here. The Word Bearers doomed themselves and us along with them. He will know what to do.’

I feel objection building in my brother, but there’s no time.

‘Hurry,’ I urge him.

Phornax slips a gauntlet under Ione Dodona’s arm. Though she pulls hard on my vambrace, her dread allows her to be dragged away.

‘What about you?’ she shrieks back.

‘Get Brother Phornax back to Magnesi,’ I command her. I bring the blade of my sword up sharply and carve through the crystalline form of a Word Bearer statue nearby. It shatters, and the cacophony fills the temple-chamber – the screech and fracture of tumbling obsidian echoes through the tunnels and crevices of the Penetralia.

‘I’ll draw it down to me,’ I tell her, ‘and give you a chance to escape.’

She starts to speak, but my blade smashes through two more Word Bearers.

‘Go!’

The tunnel devours them like a great serpent. I stand alone in a sphere of my own meagre radiance. The blackness about me is overwhelming. I feel its intention to extinguish my very existence. Who will know of Pelion? Pelion the Lesser, who fought an ancient evil in the bowels of a doomed world like the heroes of ages past, freeing the empire of Ultramar from the tyranny of things-that-should-not-be?

I put my combat shield through a cultist. My sword cuts another in half. It rains shards of pure darkness, and the shattering feels too harsh for the chamber to contain.

Impossibly, amongst the raucous destruction, I hear a crash from the far end of the chamber. I spin around – combat shield out in front of me and blade poised to strike. Some kind of unseen beast is headed straight towards me in the gloom.

It's been drawn. The distraction has succeeded. Now I will pay for my success.

I prepare myself for the horror I'm about to witness. Some dreadful thing, so disturbing in form as to be beyond my imagining. Some abominate existence that lives only to end my own. I feel the cold perversity of its solitude, its cursed power damning it to an eternity alone, ending even those foolish enough to summon it into the light. The violence of its advance burns with primordial fury. A tsunami of crystalline frag threatens to engulf me.

In that moment, I find myself thinking of Azul Gor. His face, full of bitterness and hatred, flashes momentarily before my downcast eyes. I think on his insistence that he could end me with a single world. Indeed, that word – 'Penetralia' – has led me to my doom.

Then, I realise.

Azul Gor survived the attentions of this beast of the beyond. Upon its summoning, the monster turned all who had gathered to witness it into solid darkness – perhaps Azul Gor was not invited to the ritual. Perhaps he had other, more important duties, or perhaps he had merely sensed the coming destruction.

Regardless, escaping the Penetralia cost him his eyes.

The beast is all but upon me, vomited forth from the darkness and smashing an explosive path through the victim-statues. That it means to end me is clear.

I bring the sword to the side of my neck. There is only one thing left to do – I run the blade across my throat. Its sharpened molecular edge slips into the groove created between my helm and plate seals. It slices through the power cabling and neural feeds. The light in my visor dies. The helmet's optics darken, and the data from my autosenses is cut.

I impose upon myself an artificial blindness. A disability that might save my life. Everything sizzles to static-shot black.

The impact of the beast knocks me clean off my feet, and I crash backwards through the shattered assembly. The thing feels like a charging beast of burden, some bull-grox on the stampede. It's hard to ascertain its size from such an attack, but the monster strikes me as a powerful quadruped, or a perpetually hunched thing lunging forwards on two more powerful legs.

No horns. No claws. No snaggle-toothed jaw.

Perhaps no jaws at all. Just an otherworldly bulk, full of fury and ancient hideousness.

The world has flipped about me in tumultuous darkness. I scramble back to my feet, sword and combat shield in hand. I shut down my suit lamps, plunging the entire chamber into an abyssal blackness. I doubt that this will faze the daemon-thing. I call upon my decades of training and my other superhuman senses. It is difficult – as a Space Marine I rely on sight, augmented both genetically and technologically, to kill and to avoid being killed.

Instead I tune into the beast's movements. With my feeds and helm power cut, I cannot enhance my hearing. My ears are sensitive, though, even through the dead shell of my helmet. In a cave now carpeted with glassy shards of darkness, I can hear the crunch of its footfalls.

I immerse myself in a world of sound. I detect every creak of every shard; the whisper of pulverised blackness underfoot; crystalline fragments evaporating into wisps of powdered darkness.

It's circling me. It's confused. I haven't succumbed to its curse-power.

Perhaps I'm the first to do so. I enjoy its perturbation. I concentrate. I focus.

Crunching. The sound of more shards crushed into splinters. It's behind me now. *It's behind me*…

A chill snakes up my spine, but I quash it with my resolve. Such misgiving belongs not in the minds of the Legiones Astartes.

The thing closes. I sense its horrid form at my back. I imagine its outline, and I strike.

I spin, crunching shadow-sand beneath my boots. I slam the monster with my combat shield, then back-slam it, my short blade sweeping forwards. The sword cuts through daemon-flesh, and cuts deeply.

I hear nothing. Not a screech. Not even a whimper of pain.

Perhaps the being doesn't even have a mouth, or any organ for such expression? Instead, I feel the ache of its agony within my mind.

I turn on my heel, my blade biting into it once more from the flank. I hear the crunch of an agonised stumble. The bastard thing certainly didn't like that.

It circles, but gives me a wide berth. I turn with it, my sword and shield raised.

'Come on!' I roar at the beast. 'Come on, *hell-spawn*! Face your death!'

Incredibly, it has grown wary of me. I don't think that I could destroy it with my modest short sword alone, but it definitely doesn't seem to want another taste of the blade.

Then, the monster does exactly what I don't want it to.

The crunching footfalls retreat – the thing is leaving. It has tired of playing with the blinded toy that hurts it every time, and there is other prey taking flight through the tunnels of the Penetralia. Prey that *can* be horrified into oblivion by the monster's ghastly appearance.

I swing my sword and shield about me wildly, smashing more of the statues to pieces, hoping to entice the monster back. I fail.

Sheathing my blade, I reach out with one gauntlet and stumble for the rocky reassurance of the temple-chamber wall. I have to find my way back to the terminus. I cannot risk taking off my helm – this could be a trick, and the beast could be waiting for just such an opportunity.

I have no real idea what it is capable of. It follows no theoretical that I can recall.

So I make the lonely, stumbling trek back through the Penetralia – Pelion the Lesser, lost in a labyrinth, lost in the darkness outside of my war-plate, and trapped in the darkness within. A deeper darkness, if ever there was one.

Pushing myself off one tunnel wall and scraping to another with my shield outstretched, I try to retrace my route through the winding maze of caves and passageways. It seems to take an eternity, knowing that every step of the way the beast could be ghosting my clumsy footfalls, and knowing equally that the monster could have reached Phornax and Dodona by now. *Knowing that it could have them, before they have chance to power up the mag-lev engine and make their submerged escape.*

I would warn them, but for the severance of my vox-link. I hurry, but my haste is enemy to my intention. I stumble. I fall. I get up. I feel my way on.

I know that I have reached the terminus chamber when I hear the water – the lap of the lake against the rocky shore. In my blindness, sound has become my greatest guide. I stop, and I listen.

I can hear movement. *Something* paces the moist rock of the shoreline. Beyond that, I detect breathing. Shallow, terrified breathing. Not the sound of a Space Marine.

'Dodona!' I call out. Without my vox-grille, I'm forced to shout through the ceramite shell, and the sound of my voice pains my ears after so long spent in the quieted darkness.

'*Pelion*?' she responds with gasping relief.

It's a question. She can't see me. The chamber must be in darkness. I approve. The lack of light, be it accidental or intentional, has saved her.

She moves, ever so slightly. There is a slurp and splash of water. She's kneeling in the shallows, hiding in plain sight.

I hear the beast's pace quicken. It knows where she is. It wants her to see it.

'*Pelion*,' Dodona whispers through the darkness. Her voice trembles. She must be cold in the water. Cold, and out of her mind with human, mortal fear. '*It's here*…'

'I know,' I call back. 'Brother Phornax?'

'*He's gone*.'

The thing ventures into the water, its infernal legs carrying it through the shallows towards her.

'Ione,' I say, stumbling forwards along the wall of the terminus. I, too, am making for the groundwater lake. 'Ione, I want you to stay perfectly still. Do you understand?'

'*I'm so scared*,' she replies, the honesty falling out of her.

'I know,' I try to reassure her. Then I lie. 'Me too.'

There, in the darkness of the cave and in the darkness of my helmet, I reach a conclusion. It is not enough to escape. To run for reinforcement. To flee and take the word to others that they too should flee. I am an Ultramarine. An honoured champion. Otherworld monstrosity or not, it is my duty to end this beast.

Regardless, it is between me and my only exit. The thing must die.

As Space Marines, we are taught and trained to make the most of any advantage that the immediate environment has to offer. I think on the mag-lev engine, and the damage it might visit upon the beast. I think on the millions of tonnes of rock hanging above us, and how I might bring it down upon the monster to crush the unlife from it. The darkness defeats me here – the daemon will not oblige me by standing in front of the tram, and if there were mining demolitions somewhere in the terminus chamber, there is no way I could find them. I discount these desperate strategies.

I think on the darkness. I think on the light.

The light…

'I need you to do something for me, Ione,' I call out.

'*Yes*?'

'When I tell you to, close your eyes, and dive for the bottom.'

'I can't swim!' she protests, one fear replaced by another.

'You don't need to swim. Just stay under for as long as you can. Can you do that?'

'I can't swim,' she repeats. 'Staying under the water won't be a problem.'

I listen to the monstrosity – this thing of hideous darkness that Ungol Shax has inadvertently unleashed upon the world. It strides through the shallows with predatory intent. It closes on the terrified Pioneer. I sheath my sword. I rest my shield against the wall.

I am ready.

'Now!' I bellow. I hear her go under. The dive is messy and uncertain; there is splashing, and then nothing. She is beneath the surface.

The beast splashes too. It is searching the shallows for its prey, staring down into the dark water.

I reactivate my suit lamps.

Abruptly, the movement ceases.

Everything grows still. For an agonisingly long moment, I wait, listening to the faint lapping of the waters. I go to remove my helmet, but caution stays my hand.

I wait. I wait to confirm what I already know. The Legiones Astartes are not particularly blessed with imagination. Tactical ingenuity, perhaps. Creativity in the construction of strategic defences. An inspiration of the moment, guiding our hand in the confusion of combat. We leave notions of fancy and

the elegance of creative representation to the delicacy of the human hand. I remember admiring the paintings of Priscina Xanthoi, remembrancer and artist on the Twelfth Expedition. I did not communicate any such sentiment to Xanthoi herself or my superiors; but staring at her paintings, her visions, her interpretations, I feared that I might lose myself within them. Her beautiful depictions of our early accomplishments, both bloody and bright, had an incredible life and interiority. She told our story in her portraits and vistas. When age began to claim her and she was summoned back to Terra, I felt that the expedition lost a little of its remembered grandeur. Our achievements never seemed so noble as when they were viewed through Priscina Xanthoi's incredible eyes. They certainly haven't since.

When finally I open my eyes to the gloom of the terminus chamber, I come to wonder how the remembrancer would have painted the monstrosity that stands in the shallows before me. Would she have given it eyes, a mouth, or even a face? Perhaps her gyrinx-hair brushes might have been able to capture its full, ethereal horror. The alien nature of its existence and the revulsion of reality itself about its immaterial form. Perhaps she could have done mind-scalding justice to its chthonic grotesqueness and freakery.

I cannot imagine such a nightmare. Unfortunately, I don't have to.

Ione Dodona erupts from the water, her lungs bursting to breathe the cold air again. She devotes her first lungful to the most horrified, soul-churning scream I have ever heard in my long and war-filled life. Screaming is good. Screaming means that at least she is still alive.

My suit-lamps are casting the terminus chamber in a bleak light – light enough for the daemonic monster to have caught sight of its own reflection in the undisturbed surface of the lake.

There is also light enough for me to see Ione Dodona stumbling backwards through the water, away from the statue of the beast, crafted in shadow.

She is still screaming.

I approach the indescribable horror of the crystalline thing – it is a horror beyond imagining. I fight the involuntary inclination to look away, and force myself to behold the beast. My eyes sting at the sight. I stumble. I feel my mind reel. I plunge through the glass floors of insanity. Reaching out for my training, the stunted nullification of emotional-limitation, the solid grounding of psycho-indoctrination, I claw my way back into the moment.

I am Hylas Pelion. Pelion the Lesser, Honorarius of the XIII Legion, 82nd Company.

My being floods with hatred for my enemy. It had no right to exist in this universe.

Ione Dodona is still screaming. The Pioneer is lost. Even petrified, the daemon-form was too much for the fragility of her all-too-human mind. I think of the battle for Calth, the war beneath its surface and the greater war that must surely follow. This, then, is the shape of the enemy to come. Increasingly, the Emperor's true subjects and servants will face evil in such forms, brought forth from the beyond by our brothers in darkness.

Common humanity is not ready for such visions. Madness will find them, like it has found Ione Dodona. She screams and she screams, her mind broken. Perhaps it would be a kindness to spare her this torment?

I pluck my single remaining shell from where it is mag-locked to my belt. I shake the bolt round about the inside of my armoured fist. Like a die, it rattles. Like a die, it awaits an outcome. An outcome unknowable in the enclosed space of my gauntlet, a realisation it can only find in the breech of the pistol that sits brusque and empty upon my belt. I draw the pistol and thumb the bolt into it.

The weapon comes up, level with both the crystalline abomination and the screaming Pioneer. The muzzle drifts between them. My ceramite fingertip finds its way to the trigger, and both I, Pelion the

Lesser, and the weapon find our way to realisation.

‘I was out hunting when I saw them. They was… I don’t know what they was. Flesh in all the colours of the rainbow, changing, shifting. Dozens of mouths, moving about on their bodies, spewing fire, setting the trees alight. The forest was burning. And they was floating. I tried to bring them down, but las-fire didn’t do nothing. Didn’t even break their skin. Got their attention, though.

‘I ran. I ran so fast. Needed to get back to Melora. Not fast enough. There were more of them, and the cabin was burning. I heard her screaming.

‘I don’t know what they are, but I know I want to help you take them down. Not for the Emperor or whatever-his-name-is Guilliman.

‘For Melora.’

THE UNDERWORLD WAR

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

We are supposed to know no fear.

These are not just words. To know no fear is the core of the bio-alchemical secret worming its way through the invisible threads of our genetics. We are born to fight and die, never knowing fear. We understand it. We endure it. We conquer it.

But we never suffer it, and thus we never know its true taste. Fear is nothing more than a biological reaction, a physiological curiosity that afflicts lesser beings with various degrees of cognitive impairment.

This is merely the first step. First, one must know no fear. Next comes the conviction of courage: giving one's life to the absolute purity of purpose. To rise into the ranks of the Legiones Astartes means casting all else aside. Your family is dead. Your youth is meaningless. As far as the galaxy is concerned, you were never born. You forfeit any lingering pretensions of humanity.

One warrior is nothing. The Legion is everything.

You have to live by that code. You have to embody those words, and ensure every indrawn breath is devoted to making them true.

As a Space Marine, you are no longer human. You are a legionary – beyond the concerns of mortality and into the genetic purity of the transhuman. You stand clad in your Legion's colours, carry your Legion's symbol, and serve your Legion's lord. You wield weapons forged in your Legion's foundry-fires. You live and breathe and sweat your Legion's culture, drawn from your Legion's home world, manifested in your Legion's traditions and rituals.

Above the legionary is the squad – the pack, the claw, the unit, the cell. Above the squad is only the Legion. This is strength. This is duty.

Duty must blunt all other emotion. The Legions are weapons, nothing more – warriors forged for war, no different from a ploughshare melted down to become a sword. Swords know no fear, and feel no emotion. They do not pine for the days of tilling the soil in peaceful fields, nor do they break before the first blow is even struck. The Legions, and the once-humans that make up their ranks, are the same.

But the human mind is never a clean sheet. Even taking a child's mind – before the realities of life teach a man to settle, to compromise, and to know his limits – a wealth of lore already colours the mind's canvas. We are not mindless weapons, and a divorce from humanity does not mean we are wholly inhuman. Humanity is our foundation, a limitation to be built upon. Therein lies the perfect strength of the legionary's form and function. The Emperor, for all his ignorance, got so much right. We are the weapons the human race needed to lay claim to the stars – neither human nor inhuman, but something beyond both. Transhuman, or post-human, as some of the scribes say. Or perhaps once-human is closer to the truth.

However, as with anything touched by humans, the process is not without flaw. Some minds resist the ascension from boy to legionary, and some things are carved too deep to simply be planed away while forging the psyche of the perfect soldier. Sometimes, too much of the man remains inside the soldier. These are the unlucky and flawed, the chaff that falls from the wheat. Imperfect cogs in the perfect war machine.

Most never last long enough to stand clad in ceramite at all, let alone march beneath the Imperium's banners. The Legions are brutal flesh-factories, and their trials cull the weak from the strong. To be Legiones Astartes, you must know no fear and live a life of absolute duty, to a greater

ideal.

Perhaps in the future there shall be some refinement or alteration of the process, something that steals the underlying humanity that forms our foundation. If so, I would not envy the diminished generations that would follow us.

For now, there is no sure way to murder the human spirit at the heart of every warrior. Only a fool would want to.

But I am not certain the lords of every Legion would agree with me.

– handwritten treatise, author unknown

Out of ammunition and out of luck, Kaurtal knew he had finally reached safety when he found the firelight.

The light of a humble wreckage fire caught the silhouettes of the living and the dead, painting their shadows across the cave walls. The humans were hunched, spindly things, thinned by malnutrition, bent over by wounds and weariness. Most were ravaged by radiation burns long before they had made it down into the tunnels, and they bore the Mark of Calth written in pain across their deteriorating flesh. Their shadows were careless marionettes, stunted and graceless as they danced across the stone walls.

Kaurtal's own image – a towering warrior with a helm crested by twin horns – showed a stark, dark grandeur that he no longer felt. His shadowy avatar displayed none of his armour's battle damage, nor any of the weariness that sank through his body to the bone.

The connection feed sockets running up his spine were aching drill-holes that cried out for tending. The same feeds along his shoulders and chest, where his armour linked to his genhanced physique, were punctures in his flesh, pulling raw with every movement.

He knew exactly how long he had been here. He knew it, despite the fact he lived in a world with neither day nor night, because his eye lenses' runic display kept track of every hour, every minute, every second he spent down here in the dark.

He had lost his own bolter six years and two hundred and forty-six days ago. In that time, he had carried another thirteen bolters, looting them from the fallen and inevitably losing them again when the fighting was at its most savage.

For several moments, he watched the shadow-play performance sliding over the ancient rock. His own image mocked him as it flickered against the cavern wall. Winged. Horned. The sight his enemies saw. The sight his enemies had seen for almost seven years.

'Lord,' the pack of scabbed, bloody wretches called to him. 'Lord. Great lord, please. Your blessing, lord.'

Incredible. Desperation had them believing that he cared about their lives.

Kaurtal ignored them all, moving to the hulking figure at the rear of the cavern. More of the dregs and survivors scattered before him, their shadows dancing across the walls in devilish haste.

The figure greeted him from the darkness, doing him great respect by acknowledging him first. Its eye lenses were the same blue as the drought season sky above the City of Grey Flowers, back home on Colchis. It stood in the motionless drone of active armour; its helm tusked, its great shoulders speaking of monstrous, inhuman strength. To Kaurtal, it was merely a warrior in Cataphractii plate. To the humans that served it, it was a killer made in the image of a hunched and long-forgotten primate godling. Its voice was a vox-growled expulsion of thunder on the horizon.

'Jerudai Kaurtal,' it said. 'You still live.'

Kaurtal nodded, with a hum of his own armour joints. 'So it seems.'

The Terminator lifted a ponderous claw. It might have been a welcome.

'And so our paths cross once more,' it said, 'on the two thousand, four hundred and fortieth day.' No surprise that Thuul cited the exact day, as well. They all counted the days. It was how the Word Bearers greeted one another. 'Are you the last of the Twisting Rune?'

Kaurtal was not sure. He had seen none of his Chapter in weeks. Exactly fifty-one days, to be precise, and those he had found had been bodies going to rot in an otherwise abandoned cave.

‘I believe I might be,’ he admitted. ‘We should speak.’

The Terminator was silent for several seconds before replying. ‘Then speak.’

‘Not here.’ Kaurtal gestured to the slaves.

The two Word Bearers moved further into the cave, and into a tunnel leading away from it.

‘Thuul,’ he said to the Terminator. ‘How do you tolerate them? How do you endure the whispers and the weeping, night after night? Their prayers scrape my ears.’

The Terminator trudged through the deeper blackness, its heavy tread giving an echoing rumble. The only light was that which they brought with them: the iceburn blue-white glare of their eye lenses. Onwards they walked, into the silence, breaking the serenity with boot-steps on stone and grinding armour joints.

‘Do we not deserve their reverence?’ Thuul asked. He had the voice of a scholarly avalanche. ‘And do the gods not deserve worship?’

As Kaurtal walked, he let his gloved hand trail across the jagged rock wall. ‘The gods have abandoned us,’ he said. ‘As has Lorgar.’

Thuul’s tusked helm gave a rattle of vox that sounded like a slipping gear wheel. ‘Blasphemy, brother? From one of the exalted Gal Vorbak?’

Kaurtal’s laughter was dry in the dark. ‘It has been more than half a decade since Kor Phaeron fled. Seven years of these tunnels lit by ritual fires and the muzzle flash of enemy bolters. Seven years of smelling the salt-stink of human sweat, and the spicy musk of leaking sores growing from radiation burns. Lorgar is not coming back for us, Thuul. He was never coming back for us.’

‘The sun still bleeds poison into the void.’

‘Calth’s surface may be lethal to life, but the ebb of a dying sun hardly threatens a rescue fleet, shielded against the radiation.’

Thuul rounded on him. ‘*Rescue* is a coward’s word, Jerudai.’

‘Call it whatever you wish. Would our lordly father even need a fleet? He hears the warp’s song. He weaves it and rends it with the ease of silk. Why not carve reality open and come to our aid?’

There was a pause as Thuul mused on this. ‘You drank from the Blessed Son’s wrist and tasted the divine blood. How can you, of all the Legion, bring this blasphemy to me? What madness incites you to walk this holy darkness and speak such heresy?’

‘*Speak the truth*,’ Kaurtal quoted without a smile, ‘*even if your voice shakes*.’

The Terminator trudged on. Kaurtal allowed the silence for a time, but he was not the most patient soul ever to wear the red of the XVII.

‘Have you noticed that after two years, even the empty tunnels smell of blood?’

Thuul grunted acknowledgement, but said nothing more.

‘Your servants have been mauled,’ Kaurtal prompted.

‘Yesterday,’ Thuul replied.

‘The Thirteenth hit you hard.’

‘Harder than you realise,’ said Thuul. ‘The blood you’re smelling is mine.’

His war-plate was as ruined as Kaurtal’s – as ruined as every Word Bearer stranded on this dead world of cavern-cities. The scent of leaking life could be coming from any one of the charred ruptures in the thick plating. He tapped an armoured fist against his chestplate, breaking the silence with a steel-drum clang. ‘One of my hearts has stopped beating. The other labours even now. I may have a few days remaining to me, but no more than a handful. The gods only know what’s burst inside me.’

There was another long silence before Kaurtal spoke again.

‘I have been moving through the underworld. Fighting when I must, but more often merely

watching, waiting. Learning.'

Thuul regarded him with soulless eye lenses, awaiting an explanation. Kaurtal gave it with a sigh. 'I have been counting the dead. Taking heed of all that now lie lifeless.'

'Thousands of the Ultramarines have fallen,' the Terminator said. His voice was sincere enough to make the words an avowal. 'Perhaps tens of thousands.'

'I am not speaking about counting *them,* Thuul.'

Another pause. Kaurtal could almost hear Thuul's thoughts, whispering and clicking with displeasure.

'I'm going to the surface,' Kaurtal said at last.

Thuul turned his tusked helm to the other warrior. 'To go to the surface is to die.'

'For you, perhaps. I am Gal Vorbak. My blood is poison. My touch corrodes flesh. I have eaten nothing but ash for over a year.' He showed his gauntlet, the red ceramite ridged and knuckled with bleached skeletal spurs. The same growths showed across his war-plate – his bones had been hardening and pushing through the ceramite as the months passed in the dark. Surprisingly, the pain had been nothing more than a dull throb, no different from the muscle aches of daily training.

The Terminator gave his passive regard. 'You believe the daemon inside you renders you immune to the radiation of a sickened sun?'

Not an easy question to answer. The daemon within him had been silent and unreachable for months. He was half-convinced that his last battle with an Ultramarines Librarian had somehow left him depleted – perhaps exorcised was a truer word – with the divinity flayed from his flesh. The Emperors lapdogs were beginning to realise the value of the forbidden Librarius once more.

'I believe we'll see soon enough.' Kaurtal's wings gave another shiver. Closed tight to his back, they were a worthless cloak of thick-veined, folded leathery membranes. He had not flown in months. Few caverns were spacious enough to allow such freedom.

'But why the surface, brother? What awaits you there?'

'The dead,' Kaurtal replied. 'I intend to live. I will escape Calth, even if I am the only Word Bearer to do so. And I will remember who died here. I will make the Legion remember.'

'They already remember. We cannot leave until the war is won.'

'You are deluding yourself.' Kaurtal lifted an arm, where a beaten-iron star medallion was bolted and hammered into the ceramite of his forearm. 'Where is the Graven Star?' He turned his hand, showing a ritual engraving of a sinuous serpent. 'Where are the Asps of the Sacred Sands?' He reached to his chestplate, where a ruined parchment showed the faint signs of a red palm print. 'Where is the Flayed Hand? I will tell you, Thuul. The Graven Star are dead. The Asps of the Sacred Sands are dead. The Flayed Hand are corpses at the bottom of a pit, skulls leering up in silent laughter at their fate, lost to an Ultramarines ambush. How many of us remain? We lead starving weaklings in a war with only one end – the Thirteenth will destroy us, and our own Legion will remember none of it.'

Kaurtal turned his pauldron as he spoke, showing the mangled sigil of the Twisting Rune Chapter. 'How many Chapters have died down here, Thuul? It has been *seven years.* Where are your brothers?' He gestured to the snarling daemon face on the Terminator's shoulder guard. 'Where are the rest of Hol Beloth's men?'

The two Word Bearers stood in the pregnant silence, saying no more. To Kaurtal, the dark cavern was a manifestation of every other cave; it embodied every night spent down here in the lightless, blood-smelling black.

Thuul finally spoke. 'You truly mean to abandon the Legion, Jerudai?'

‘They abandoned *us,*’ Kaurtal replied. ‘Lorgar isn’t coming. The Legion has left us here to die. I am going to the surface.’

‘You are damning yourself to apostasy.’ The Terminator growled a Colchisian command, and blades lengthened from their housings on the back of his oversized gauntlets. ‘And you know I must kill you for even voicing all this,’ admitted Thuul.

Kaurtal nodded. ‘I know you must try.’

Bad secrets always tended to be buried the deepest. After leaving Thuul’s cavern, bloodstained and even more battered than when he had arrived, it took Kaurtal almost a month to reach the surface. The journey was not an easy one. The Underworld War raged, as it had raged for almost seven years, in brutal spits and spurts, filling the caves with the grind of overwhelming violence for several nights, then fading back to give a few hours of respite.

Kaurtal had fought on Isstvan V, when the skies burned black from the funeral pyres of three butchered Legions. Until he had been forced to burrow beneath the surface of Calth, he had honestly believed Isstvan to be the pinnacle of what was possible in war.

The apostate walked west once he abandoned his brothers below. Always west, towards the setting arc of the poisoned sun. Its swollen blue malignancy stained the sky: cancerous in imagery, and in the realities of its radiation.

He was sweating inside his armour, in the places where his armour had not yet become his skin. Where his flesh had fused with the ceramite, he either did not need to sweat, or simply had not encountered conditions vile enough to bring about a bodily reaction. Sometimes he coughed up blood, expelling it through the maw of bestial teeth his helm’s mouth grille had become. That was not the radiation. That was just his body adapting.

The ghosts of Calth fought as he went west. They paid him no heed, for they were mere memory, and he was iron and blood and bone. The apostate Word Bearer heard their shouts and cries, seeing the dead warriors as flashes and flickers at the edge of his vision. He listened as they waged a war both sides had already lost, reprising their roles from the day this world had died.

When he did not walk, he flew. Before Calth, his wings had been beautiful things: a swan’s pinions, white-feathered and clean. The Underworld War leeched their health, shedding feathers like autumn leaves, accelerating the Change as the daemon within exerted its influence over his genetic code. The swan’s wings had become something bony and bladed, a spread of leathery flesh with thick veins in lightning-bolt patterns across the silken membranes. Stronger now, without a doubt. More useful.

Stronger, but stranger. They smelled of animal musk, and they sweated blood. Stretching them felt no different from holding one’s arms wide.

Despite the weight of his armour, beating them three times was enough to lift him from the ground. He could not fly for long, though, for the effort sapped all strength from his muscles, but once high enough he could glide for an hour or more.

He did not sleep on his travels. He had evolved beyond the need for it, even beyond the slack limits of his regenesis among the Legiones Astartes. He no longer needed to eat, though thirst was ever a plague. Dehydration thickened his tongue. Swallowing his own saliva was a blessed but false relief. Sometimes, he would swallow his own blood.

He journeyed across the unending plains, crunching the blackened husk of vegetation beneath his boots. An ocean of unharvested crops, dried and rotted from the dragon-breath heat of an irradiated sun.

On the ninth day of his journey, he walked through a dirt storm. Solar radiation tortured Calth, toyed with it, making a mockery of its weather patterns. The apostate saw the horizon darken with the coming maelstrom – a tidal wave of earth-dust and tormented soil. He prepared for it as it rolled down from the western mountains, though those preparations consisted of nothing more than folding his wings tighter to his back. Instinct made him reach to check the conductive strip of mag-locking metal that bound his bolter to his thigh... but he reached for thin air. He had lost his last gun long ago.

When the winds howled their highest, and grit clattered against his ceramite armour in a ceaseless, gravelly barrage, the apostate trudged on through the darkness, blinded by the dust of this violated world. He could all too easily imagine that the planet hated him – as if the world's soul sensed the last defiler upon its surface and wheezed its last, dirty breaths to spite him. He knew war, and he knew how warriors died. How many slipped into death with a final curse on their lips? Calth itself, evidently, was no different.

He reached the first graveyard on the eleventh day. This was why he had come to the surface. This was why he was here. Someone had to remember.

The graveyard owed nothing to the stately order of rural cemeteries with their rows of stone tablets, and resembled even less the sand-blasted menhir henges of Colchisian burial grounds. Here was carnage, spread thick across the churned earth. Tank hulls rotted in the sickly light, darkened by rust, giving infected-teeth leers from their corroded dozer blades. The bodies were mummified in their sundered armour, cracked open to desiccate in the wounded glow of Veridia.

Kaurtal hiked through the slain, seeking the sigils carved and burned and sculpted onto shoulder guards. On every red-armoured corpse, the same grey-painted skull glared. Its mouth was an iron lock, closed to silence all speech.

The Unspeaking. The Unspeaking died here, annihilated beneath an Ultramarines counterattack.

These bodies were not from his Chapter, then. The Unspeaking were warrior-sages to match any others, stilling their tongues with proud, proud oaths of silence. Kaurtal respected them, but had little to do with their works.

Among the Word Bearers dead lay hundreds of ragged skeletons clad in shreds of cloth and dirty rags. The Unspeaking's faithful followers, no doubt. After nearly seven years in the tainted sun they were little more than husks, but he knew that if he had chanced upon this gravesite in the hours after the battle, opening their slack jaws would reveal tongueless maws – a display of the Unspeaking's ritual mutilation for its oath-sworn serfs.

Kaurtal took two things from the unburied dead. The first was a bolter, graven with kill-markings and patchy with corrosion, but proven functional after a test shot sent a shell pounding into the armour-plating of a nearby Rhino. He felt no guilt at breaking the silence of this massacre site. He could not inflict any greater indignity upon them than that which they had already endured, baked to the bone by a fouled sun.

The second thing he stole was a talisman from around a warrior's neck. A simple necklace of cheap bronze with the warrior's name, squad designation and Chapter symbol scripted in Colchisian cuneiform. A rare token – the habit was much more common among the lesser soldiers of the Imperial Army, with their identification tags necessary for collating casualties. As if anyone would care about the management of mere human corpses in a war led by the Legions.

He tied the trinket around his wrist and walked west, leaving the first graveyard behind.

He reached Dainhold three days later.

The city lay in dust – a skyscape of toppled towers and dead spires, with streets torn raw in the

wake of tank treads. The chasm-scars of orbital bombardment were graven deep across the city's fallen districts, where lance fire raked its way across the population centres and slaughtered the city before it even knew it was under attack.

He had fought here after making planetfall. He had fought his way through the burning city, throwing himself at Ultramarines shield-walls, or firing back from behind barricades of tumbled rock and ruined bodies. The running firefights had none of the claustrophobic choke so omnipresent and overplayed in the underworld. Bolters had fired that day without echoing against the confining stone.

How good it had been to fight freely. He had even flown, spreading his wings to soar above the embattled streets, firing at will on the helpless warriors below.

But that was then, and this was now.

Kaurtal ventured into the city, making his way down the silent roads, walking around shattered tanks and fallen buildings. Spires still rose in ruined grandeur, their sides blasted open to the light of the lethal sky. Bodies were skinless, sinewless bones, many fallen onto the rockcrete ground in reach of inactive lasguns and solid-shot rifles. Many more had died unarmed, huddled together or alone; some with their remains scattered across roads or plazas, others squatting in corners or ducking under cover. Perhaps instinct had sent them fleeing and scurrying in those last moments. Perhaps they had died when the sky rained fire, or when the Warmaster's allies brought Calth to heel with bolter and blade.

Mere minutes into the city, he found his first Word Bearers.

Kaurtal thudded to the ground, boots cracking the rockcrete as he hit, and bunched his wings to his back. The avenue was a scene from some visionary's sketch of a pre-Unity mythic hell, with Ultramarines and Word Bearers gone to the bone within their armour, spitted by spears and making barricades with their own bodies.

He walked amongst the dead, letting his fingers brush delicately over their broken ceramite. One Ultramarine was nothing more than powder and armour fragments beneath a Fellblade's treads – a lone armoured arm reached out from beneath the dead tank as the only indication that a warrior had died under there. One of the Word Bearers was lanced thrice through the chest, pinned to the stone wall of a habitation spire. Four hundred dead warriors, and the bones of their war-thralls at their feet.

A low hum pervaded the scene, setting Kaurtal's teeth on edge. Some of the dead Space Marines' suits of armour were still active after all this time, still thrumming in tune with their back-mounted power packs.

It was one corpse in particular that most drew Kaurtal's eye. He approached it with a certain confident caution, the way a medium might prepare to make contact with the restless dead. The slain Word Bearer's armour was decorated with gold runes, god-sigils on arterial red, the markings of the Inscribed. Kaurtal knew the Chapter well.

'Hello, Jyrvash,' he said to the impaled captain.

Jyrvash did not reply. Jyrvash did not move at all.

Kaurtal reached up to his brother's helm, unlocking the seals at the dead warrior's collar. A serpent's hiss of vented air pressure allowed the helmet to come free, and he looked upon the dry-leather skull that had been Jyrvash's face. The smell of decomposition, freed at last, was a gaseous corruption intense enough to make Kaurtal's eyes sting. As a child on the streets of the City of Grey Flowers, he had seen bloodfly eggs burst open in the belly of a dead dog – this smell was the same. He had evolved past disgust, but not past the bite of bitter memory.

'You died badly, Jyrvash.' His tone stole any possibility of the words being a question. 'But then, doesn't everyone…'

The skull stared back, its hollow eye sockets neither knowing nor agreeing; merely pits to display the absence of life and personality.

Kaurtal let the helm drop to the road, and reached for the ornate dagger sheathed at the dead warrior's hip. More god-runes marked the rusted blade. Another memento. Another Chapter to remember.

He turned away, stretching his wings and bunching his muscles to leap skyward.

'*Kaurtal*,' said the corpse behind him.

A year before Calth, in the days that followed Isstvan V, Kaurtal had been summoned to the *Fidelitas Lex*. He had anticipated delivering a report on the Twisting Rune's casualties from the killing fields, or perhaps a briefing regarding new recruitment to ease the savage losses that they had sustained fighting against the Raven Guard.

He had, of course, assumed wrong. He had actually been summoned to his death.

Argel Tal, the Crimson Lord, was already spoken of in whispers across the fleet. He and his men – the so-called Blessed Sons – had shown the truths of their divine forms. They were god-touched, no longer human or legionary, but a sacred bonding of flesh and spirit. Possessed, in the crudest terms; ascended, by any other judgement. The Crimson Lord waited in the funerary chambers aboard the *Lex*, watching servitors raise bronze and marble statues of those slain in the recent massacre.

Argel Tal wore the red ceramite not yet adopted by the rest of the Legion – that would soon change, as they armoured themselves in arterial crimson before the betrayal at Calth. His face was the dusky tan of all desert-born Word Bearers, and his eyes showed a repression of emotion that danced somewhere between unshared pain and unreleased anger. He spoke softly, calmly, but it seemed an effort to do either.

'Sergeant,' Argel Tal said, by way of greeting. He spoke in two voices now: his own soft tones, and the bass rumble of the *thing* inside him.

Kaurtal was no longer sure of Argel Tal's rank since his Change, and said as much. That brought a tight, tense smile to the other warrior's lips.

'Gal Vorbak,' Argel Tal replied. 'For now.'

The Crimson Lord would soon create the Vakrah Jal – the Chapter of Consecrated Iron – but Kaurtal had had no idea of it back then. Even if he had, it still would not have aroused his suspicions. Not so soon after their victory on Isstvan.

Argel Tal said nothing more. He was watching the servitors raise a statue of a slender young woman in a flowing dress-robe.

'It's true, then,' Kaurtal ventured. 'The Blessed Lady has fallen.'

'Warriors fall,' Argel Tal turned to Kaurtal, his words punctuated by the slither of lengthening teeth. 'She was murdered.'

'An ill omen,' Kaurtal said quietly.

'I will not argue with that,' the other warrior replied. They settled into a companionable silence for several seconds, watching the servitors work.

'Why was I summoned?' Kaurtal asked him. 'Have I displeased Lord Aurelian?'

'Far from it. He wishes to offer you a gift.'

Something in the Gal Vorbak's tone made Kaurtal's skin crawl. He repeated the words with measured neutrality. 'A gift.'

'You have a choice.' The Crimson Lord was either deaf to his brother's trepidation, or chose to ignore it. 'Lorgar has bid me increase the numbers of the Gal Vorbak. He desires more Blessed Sons,

among both the Calth assault force and the fleets tasked to spread across Ultramar.'

Kaurtal's breath caught in his throat. 'You can do this? Mesh flesh and spirit at will?'

'The primarch has asked, and I will obey.'

Hindsight was a treacherous boon. All too often, *what might have been* was tantalising and worthless in equal measure. A hundred questions raced through Kaurtal's mind in that moment – questions of blood and pain and the body-horror of sharing your flesh with an alien entity.

And Argel Tal would have replied with honesty, for he was no deceiver. He would have spoken of the changes, the wrenching of bone, the boiling of blood, and the madness of two voices sharing space inside one mind.

But Kaurtal asked none of these things. His racing heart refused anything but the fierce rush of temptation. 'And my choice?'

Argel Tal nodded, knowing in that moment just how this would end.

'You can starve yourself of all nourishment and carve holy symbols across your flesh,' he told Kaurtal, 'purifying your mortal form for the union to come. You may then return to me if you hear the calling of the Neverborn from behind the veil. If you survive the ritual, then I will offer you a taste of my blood to begin the communion, and lead you into a new life as one of the Gal Vorbak. The Neverborn will never refuse such a devoted host.'

Starvation. Purification. Trances and visions and scarification.

He did not fear the trials, for he knew no fear. Even so, he hesitated at the mutilation of his flesh. What if he failed the offering? What if he could not fully recover? What if he required extensive bionics even to stand and fight with his brothers in the future?

'You mentioned a choice,' Kaurtal prompted again.

'I did. You may undergo the necessary purifications as I've just explained. Or you can risk a cruder, more abrupt offering, and pray the Neverborn deem you worthy for union. That is how the first of us accepted this gift, though we didn't realise what was being offered at the time.'

'What if I choose the quicker path?' Kaurtal asked.

'It is much more dangerous. More likely to succeed, but failure brings death.'

'But if I choose it?'

Argel Tal gathered the right words. 'It was different for each of us. Some saw nothing but blackness, others saw our pasts, and others, such as Xaphen...' Argel Tal gestured to another statue being lifted onto a plinth. 'Xaphen saw the future. He saw what might come to pass, if the future unrolled along one of its many thousand possible pathways.'

Kaurtal needed no time to prepare an answer. 'I will walk the same path you walked, my lord.'

His eagerness did not make Argel Tal smile. Again, with hindsight, that would have meant something.

'Then once we are in the warp, I will take you to a specially unprotected part of the ship, away from the tenebrous guardianship of the Geller field. You will offer what I offered, and do as I did.'

'What should I offer? What must I do?'

Argel Tal drew a golden sword, clearly of Terran make, forged for the fists of the Legiones Custodes. It should not have flared into life in his hands, and yet the blade did just that. Little lightning-snakes rippled down the stolen steel.

'You must offer your life, Jerudai.' He rested the tip of the blade against his brother's throat. 'You must die.'

He started at the corpse's voice, but Jyrvash stood unmoving, unliving, slouched against the wall and

pinned by the spears lancing through his body. The alkaline wind rattled against the dead man's armour, with little skitterings of blown grit.

'Jyrvash,' Kaurtal said. He knew no fear. There was no unease in his voice. No, none. None at all. A daemon living in your blood could not change that about you. Surely.

He ran his ridged bone spurs in a threatening, scraping caress down the skull's side.

'Jyrvash,' he said again.

Nothing. Just another ghost of Calth. Jyrvash's skinless head tilted and toppled, smashing on the rockcrete ground.

If it was an omen, Kaurtal could not imagine what it was supposed to portend. Things could hardly get much worse for the Word Bearers on this accursed world. Never before had overwhelming, lightning victory and drawn-out, grinding defeat colluded so closely.

Power armour thrummed louder nearby. A shadow danced at the edge of his vision. He turned again, feeling his fingers harden, lengthen, the skin retracting around curved claws. Where a human's reaction to unease was seen in an elevated heart rate and the onset of fear-sweat, Kaurtal's body reacted by forging weapons from his flesh, shifting him into the divine murderousness of his killing form. Bones creaked and stretched. Flesh ripped and reformed. It was not agony, but nor was it painless.

He stared down the deserted avenue, his senses bladed and beast-keen. The bodies lay as they had lain before, and the buildings still stood as silent as kilometre-high tombstones driven into the dirt.

Kaurtal, came the voice from inside. The suddenness of it peeled the lips back from his teeth, and for the first time in months, he felt a stirring from the daemon within. A sluggish sensation, like something turgid in the silt at the bottom of a lake. His blood thickened with it, and the bony protrusions spiking out from his armour gave sympathetic aches. He could feel the presence within questing with its senses, stretching out tendrils of consciousness and withdrawing them in a lazy re-coiling.

We are no longer within the caverns? It was not exactly speech. The daemon's thoughts coalesced in Kaurtal's skull only slightly more slowly than his own inner monologue. A 'conversation' with the creature inside was as simple and subtle as the seamless transference of ideas and concepts at the merest whim.

You have slumbered, Kaurtal pulsed back, *for over three months. This is the surface.*

My wounds forced the silence of slumber. Was there the blade's edge of defensiveness in the daemon's thoughts? Kaurtal was quite sure there was. *The blue warp-weaver is dead?*

He recalled the battle. Some agonies wormed their way into the mind, as unshakeable as a splinter beneath a nail, and witch-lightning tearing at your very soul was one of them. The pain had been... revelatory. He dimly remembered laughing, learning, even as merciful grey mist threatened to drown his consciousness. Even as his blood boiled in his veins, and his second soul had fallen into untouchable darkness.

The Librarian is dead, Kaurtal sent back. *Three months in his grave, dead by my hand. I have left the Underworld War behind.*

I hunger.

There is no blood on the surface.

The daemon stretched itself through Kaurtal's body, filling his bones all the way to his toes and fingertips. Muscle twitches made his fingers flicker, and his left eyelid started to spasm.

But I hunger, the daemon said again. Kaurtal's teeth clacked together as sentient pain oozed through the bones of his jaw.

'*I hunger*,' the daemon said again, this time with the Word Bearer's mouth.

Kaurtal repressed a shudder, then repressed the symbiote itself. It took focus, but concentration shackled the daemon from making any claim over his physical form. Calculus equations always worked best for Kaurtal. Some of the Gal Vorbak prayed, or simply gave in to their skin-riding daemons, letting the Neverborn claim them at will, but Kaurtal had always suppressed his sacred parasite with the repetition of long, involved calculations. Reciting and solving them occupied his mind, keeping his thoughts free of the creature's passions.

Our wings hurt, Jerudai.

They atrophied. We were in the dark too long.

I hunger.

Enough. We have a duty up here.

The daemon slithered through his veins. He felt it coiling tight around his spine, just as he felt it licking at the filament nerves behind his eyeballs.

What duty?

Kaurtal turned from the headless corpse of his fallen brother, moving away through the urban detritus.

A duty to make the Legion remember us. I am gathering relics from each Chapter that d–

The daemon's displeasure came as a jolt of pain in the looping cables of Kaurtal's bowels.

Legions and pride and memories and brotherhood. Man-concerns. Man-duties. Let us hunt and feed and–

No. His interruption was as smooth as the daemon's had been, and just as forceful. Kaurtal's mouth was a mangled mess of ceramite and ivory teeth. He spat blood onto the road. *No. This matters to me.*

Slits gashed open in the side of his arm. Four new eyes, each one yellowishly reptilian, opened and regarded the dead city. They rolled in their ceramite-and-muscle sockets, then closed and sealed over. Kaurtal felt others opening on his shoulder blades, and another by his knee. These also rolled and stared, before sealing closed in viscous, moist whispers.

Something moved under his ribcage. Something else moved in his guts. He sensed the daemon's disgust.

You are hollowed through by cancers. They hang inside you, these black fruits, staining your body with sickness. You would die without me, Jerudai. This pilgrimage on the surface will see you dead.

The sun is still poison, he sent back.

I can see that better than you, host. The daemon did something inside his chest. There was the grainy, fluid feeling of thick juice flowing across his insides. *I can pulp these black fruits, rip them from their cradles of flesh and bone, and dissolve them into your bloodstream. There will be pain.*

There's always pain.

Silence now. Let me save us from the foolishness of Man-pride.

Kaurtal took three steps before his swimming vision drove him to his knees. His Legion-granted sensory organs had compensated for any dizziness since their implantation back in his dimly-recalled childhood, so disorientation was as unfamiliar as it was unwelcome. Yet he thudded down onto his hands and knees, dizzy as a drunkard, while something serpentine slipped behind his eyes and started gnawing on the meat of his mind.

Your brain is ripe with corruption. It is a wonder you aren't blind.

Kaurtal felt his fangs clench together, cutting the street's silence with a porcelain squeal. One of his

claws broke against the rockcrete, but the aborted talon lengthened fresh from the bleeding finger once more.

To his left, half a metre from his clawed hand, a dead Word Bearer regarded him with eye lenses the colour of fresh frost.

'Brother,' he greeted the corpse, feeling the sick urge to laugh. Its armour was too bolter-blasted to offer any hint of identity. All that mattered were the god-runes carved into its ceramite. That much at least, Kaurtal would remember and bring back to the Legion. He had Jyrvash's knife as evidence.

The dead warrior regarded him with its ice-pale eye lenses.

'*Kaurtal*,' it said. Its voice was the alkaline wind itself, formed of whispers and the clatter of dust against armour. '*You have abandoned us*.'

He had chosen the quicker path, as he suspected every Word Bearer offered this rare gift would surely choose themselves. What manner of faithless coward would hesitate in the face of a chance to bond with the Divine? He wished to be blessed as the Gal Vorbak were blessed, not spend months in sedate prayer.

'Do it,' he had said to Argel Tal. He had even leaned his head back, baring his throat.

But the Crimson Lord sheathed his blade, and returned his gaze to the statues being lifted into place.

'Tomorrow,' the other warrior said in his curious dual-voice. 'Go back to your ship, Jerudai. Reflect on what I offer, and if you wish to die tomorrow, then I will kill you myself.'

He had done as he was bidden. While aboard the *Mournsong*, flagship of the Twisting Rune Chapter, he had avoided his squad and refused to take counsel with any of his brothers. The Chaplain came to him, requesting entry into his meditation chambers, but Kaurtal sent the warrior-priest away with a plea for solitude.

The next night, he secured teleportation passage back to the *Fidelitas Lex*. As dangerous as such translocation was while both ships were at the mercy of the warp's tides, taking an unshielded gunship would be an act of suicidal futility.

When the shrieking, snaking mist of teleportation cleared, Argel Tal was already waiting for him. Robed thralls chanted and prayed, while servitors worked at the chamber's edges, murmuring as they adjusted the hand-wrenched, archaic clockwork machinery.

Argel Tal was helmed now. Kaurtal acknowledged his lord's presence with a salute, fist over his heart, though they seemed past such mundane forms of address.

'You knew I'd come,' he said.

Argel Tal's only answer was to draw his sword and walk away.

Kaurtal followed.

He scrambled to his feet, wings flaring wide, the looted bolter weighty in his fist. Its sculpted muzzle aimed down at the dead body, defying the corpse to move, to speak, to betray any one aspect of a life that it should not possess.

Nerkhulum, he said, voiceless and inwardly.

I said to be silent. Do you believe it is easy to re-weave mortal matter? Your flesh is weakened from the sun, and reshaping it is causing you to bleed within. Let me work on saving us, Jerudai.

The Word Bearer stood in the street, breathing heavily, both hearts beating hard.

You didn't hear that? he almost shouted.

I hear the liquid whispers of your straining, cancerous organs. I hear them as your reward for

abandoning the Legion.

Something is alive here. He kept the bolter aimed down.

Nothing is alive here. The cancers riddling your skull put pressure on your brain and toy with your senses. Nothing more.

That sounded right. It sounded true.

And yet it felt like a lie.

He was stronger with the daemon awake. His senses were more keen, reaching out further. Nothing moved, not on the street, not in the hollow windows of the battered hab-spires. He could smell the charcoal corrosion of decaying tanks, and the cinnamon after-musk of long-rotted bodies. The smell of a slain city.

The dead were dead. They did not speak. They did not accuse you of deserting your brothers, and forsaking your duty.

Kaurtal fired, and annihilated the helmet in a burst of scattering shrapnel and bone shards.

Petty, came the daemon's voice. If it was not a spoken word, it was still the closest the Word Bearer's mind could come to giving shape to the daemon's bored chastisement.

For a moment, he stood in the road, looking down at the trinkets and relics bound to his armour. Mementos of fallen Chapters, left over after a bitter victory, now languishing outside of the XVII Legion's memory.

Someone had to do this. Someone had to make them remember the fallen. Eight years ago, he had stood in one of the flagship's cemeteries with Argel Tal himself, seeing dead warriors being enshrined in marble and bronze. The slain of Isstvan, remembered with honour for their sacrifice. What justice for the slain of Calth?

He would stand before Lorgar and cast the relics of lost Chapters down at his primarch's feet. Nothing else mattered.

Not long after Kaurtal left Jyrvash behind, he came across the body of a dead Titan. It was said that the Mechanicus priests fashioned their humanoid war engines to stand in the Machine God's image, as totemic as any theist avatar from before Old Night, but the Reaver was much less grand in its morbid repose. A dead machine lying in the dust, all sense of connection to its masters' species gone as it lay broken across the churned earth.

The kill-wound was not hard to see. Rocket-punctures pitted and cracked the Reaver's face like cratered acne. The command crew likely had not even suffered when the end came. A flash of flame, an immolated cockpit, and they would be dead before their Titan hit the ground.

Kaurtal landed upon its shoulder, clawed boots digging into the corroded plating. It made a good vantage point from which to look out over the destroyed plaza. Corrosion had eaten deep into the Titan's armour-plating, making it difficult to determine the Titan's original allegiance. Dead warriors from both Legions lay strewn around its fallen bulk, but a habitation spire had toppled in the avenue to the east, leaving a half-metre of dust and debris blanketing the ground and shrouding the dead with ash. Irregular mounds marked the final resting places of countless warriors. It was the closest thing to a real graveyard that the dead on Calth's surface would ever see.

Nerkhulum remained silent, presumably working to excise the poisoned meat from the Word Bearer's body.

Kaurtal dropped down, wading through the dirt and debris. His red armour turned grey to the waist as he kicked up the dust merely by walking. The first body he hauled from its powdery cairn was an Ultramarine, clad in rotted cobalt-blue, and he let it tumble back into the dry muck. Dust-devils

swirled, protesting the irreverent way he disturbed the fallen.

The second was also an Ultramarine. As was the third.

He found a Word Bearer, but the corpse's arm cracked from its shoulder when he tried to lift the remains. Brushing aside more dust revealed the faded, greyed-red ceramite he had been seeking, along with the emblem across the breastplate: a face, pale against the dark background, shaped as a sorrowful masquerade mask. The Chapter of the Iron Veil.

Kaurtal reached down to grip the mask's edges, ready to pry the ivory emblem clear of the armour-plating. He thumped a boot onto the corpse for leverage, bunched his muscles, and pulled.

'*Kaurtal*,' the half-buried body choked, like a man gagging on ashes.

He released the chestplate, but the dead Word Bearer kept rising, dust sluicing from the old armour ceramite, hissing as it slid free. Kaurtal backed away, claws lengthening, acidic saliva stringing between his malformed teeth. He backed right into something cold and dusty, and just as dead.

'*Kaurtal*,' the thing behind him rasped. '*You abandoned the Legion*.'

First there was light – acid-strong, acid-bright. It was light at its absolute transcendence, the very apotheosis of illumination's concept, too bright for mortal reasoning.

He had only one thought through the dissolving burn of incomprehensible brightness, and that was a simple one: this was death.

The light finally allowed other sensation to trickle through. He heard wave crashes and screams; the cries of men, women and monsters drowning and burning in an ocean of the same white fire that threatened to swallow him.

A cracking jolt brought him back into the chamber. Ward runes and their more pervasive counterparts – sigils used to summon – lined the walls at uneven intervals, many overlapping their cousins. Some were cast in brass, others no more than glyphs knife-carved into the dark iron of support pillars. He reached to grip the blade impaling his chest. His fingers closed around the metal, but he could not pull it free.

Kaurtal staggered, his eyes flowing over the chamber once more. Here was the abode of muttering human priests and chained astropaths twitching in fluid-filled coffin pods, forced to live lives of endless slumber, so others might harvest their eternal dreams.

A human soul was a candle in the endless ocean of the warp. A psyker's soul was a conflagration, as dangerous to the Neverborn as it was tempting. It could be harnessed. Except that was not the right word, was it? Not harnessed, nor even channelled.

No, it could be *weaponised*.

Kaurtal had never been told this – no one spoke of such things, and he sensed his comprehension was incomplete – yet he knew all of this implicitly, the moment he opened his eyes and bore witness to the clanking, grinding pods and their captured cargo.

He knew it because...

...because there was Something Else inside his head, melting its thoughts into his. With the same ice-lance plunge of lore from nowhere, he knew the taste of a thrashing soul between his teeth, and how terror only spiced the flavour.

Nerkhulum, said the Something Else inside his mind. *You are a weak host, but we shall see how this game ends.*

Kaurtal's attempt to speak left his lips in a gush of blood. Argel Tal pulled the sword from his chest in a clean yank, letting the Custodian blade's power field sizzle away the blood marking the metal.

That is my blood, Kaurtal thought, watching it bake away into smoke. He fell to his knees, back on

board the *Fidelitas Lex*, but still somehow surrounded by the crashing of waves and the shrieking of souls.

He felt his skin sloughing free with the sound of ripping leather. Bones cracked and split and pushed up, up, up through his body.

His scream had joined the others, and Sergeant Jerudai Kaurtal of the Twisting Rune Chapter died upon the deck of his pri-march's flagship.

The dead encircled him, walking in weak-kneed staggers, coughing dust from their helm's rebreather grilles. Most carried no weapons, though a few still clung to rusted blades with the tenacious instinct of muscle memory.

No denying it now. No claiming it was a hallucination brought on by cranial pressure, or the disorientation of radiation poisoning. More of them were still rising from the dirt – never the Ultramarines, only the warriors in red. His own brothers.

'*Kaurtal*,' they wheezed, dry voices cracking over the vox. '*You abandoned the Legion*.'

Even the dead accused him. He railed back at them, cursing, frothing, spitting. Corrosive saliva sprayed from his fanged maw.

'The Legion abandoned *us!* I will make them remember the fallen!'

The lead figure bore the crest of a captain. Holes glared emptily where eye lenses had once shone clean and blue.

'*Death will free you of delusion*,' the revenant breathed.

'*And of self-pity*,' wheezed one of the others.

'*You run from duty*,' the captain pointed at him with a shaking, rattling hand. '*You run from what the Legion asked of you*.'

'*And you call it courage*.' Yet another corpse staggered closer, its head angled wrong, on a broken neck. '*You run, but call it courage*.'

'*You cower, but name it virtue*.'

'*You betray, but name it justice*.'

Kaurtal roared at the advancing remnants, more spit flying from his teeth and the black snake that had been his tongue. The Change should have come easier now that Nerkhulum was awake, melding his body flawlessly into its divine form, and yet he felt the daemon's sluggishness drag against his muscles, a lactic burn resisting his every effort.

Stop fighting me, he sent within, in a convulsion of panic. His wings beat in futility, as bones shifted and slid beneath his skin.

You are a weak host. Nerkhulum's voice was as sharp and nasty as the pain of his straining muscles. *And now we see how the game ends.*

The first of the dead Word Bearers made a graceless lunge for his throat, corroded fingers breaking against his armoured gorget. Kaurtal killed the thing in reply, smashing it to the ground with a bone claw and grinding its helm beneath his boot.

They marched through the dust – some staggering, some managing to make a stumble into something resembling a run. Kaurtal's bolter kicked and boomed, slamming explosive shells into the closest figures. The Word Bearers burst and shattered, falling into the dust, naming him a traitor even as they dropped in withered ruin. It made no difference. Their hands rose from the ground, trailing dust as they clawed over his boots and greaves. Sparks flew from scraping fingertips. They came on in a choking, gasping tide.

Kaurtal turned, took three running steps to shoulder-barge his way through the husks blocking his

path, and launched skyward with another roar. This one sounded dangerously close to a cry for help.

He crashed back into the dirt, colliding hard with the debris miring the ground. His helm struck rockcrete, painting it red, and a lance of cold metal rebar pounded through his collar, leaving him choking on rusted metal, gagging for air that would not come.

Any scream he would have voiced in shame was stolen by the iron impaling his throat. The only sounds he made were gurgling grunts as he jerked his head back, trying to wrench himself from his impaling.

The fire in his wings started a second later, as his nervous system caught up with the reason he had fallen from the sky. One of the dead warriors had cut a wing clean from his back. Kaurtal could hear the insectile buzz of an active power sword.

He knew no fear. He knew no fear. He knew no fear.

'Wait,' he growled from a blood-bubbling throat. The iron-on-bone grind of pulling himself free felt worse than the smacking kick of impact. 'Wait.'

Such a weak host, the daemon said again. *Destined for treachery. Your resolve will break. Must I be strong for both of us?*

Nerkhul–

In that moment he was swallowed, somehow, inside his own mind. He felt it as a compacting of sorts, an enclosing.

You betray your brothers, and now you would beg me for succour? You are more maggot than man, Jerudai Kaurtal of the Seventeenth. Not a warrior, but a worm. I have no desire to be bound within such a feeble vessel.

Kaurtal screamed with no mouth and cried out with no voice. He was still trying to shriek when the walking dead fastened their rusted fingers upon his armour-plating, and pulled him down into the blackness.

Jerudai Kaurtal never stood back up.

Argel Tal waited with the body for almost an hour, pacing the ornate chamber with his weapons sheathed, arms folded across his breastplate. His boot-steps sent tremors along the deck grating. The servitors were too mind-locked to pay him any heed, and the chanting thralls too lost in their fever-dream vision quests, but a few of the robed menials flinched back when the Crimson Lord glanced in their direction. The Word Bearer had nothing of anger or irritation upon his features, but since Isstvan he had noticed few humans could stand to look into his eyes. They sensed the daemon within his body, lurking behind his gaze, and his second soul fed upon their fear.

It could have been the same with Kaurtal. It should have been.

But Sergeant Jerudai Kaurtal remained dead on the deck. Not without regret, Argel Tal nudged the body with his boot.

'He's dead,' said a gentle voice from the chamber's doorway. Too gentle to be mistaken for human, yet too resonant ever to be called weak. Argel Tal turned to the unexpected intruder, lowering his head in reverence the moment he caught sight of the filigreed red ceramite armour. 'Truly dead, that is.'

'My lord, I cannot do this.'

Lorgar Aurelian, primarch of the Word Bearers, rested a fatherly hand upon his son's shoulder. The last time Argel Tal had seen him, that scholarly, reserved, gold-inked face had been decorated in the blood speckling of a hundred dead Raven Guard. Now, it was warmed by a patient smile.

'You have walked the roads of Heaven and Hell, my son. You can do anything. What troubles you?'

Argel Tal nodded down at Kaurtal's slain form. 'They keep dying, father.'

'So this is not the first?'

Despite himself, Argel Tal gave a rueful little smile. 'No. This is the thirteenth.'

'I see.' Lorgar lowered himself into a crouch, his black cloak trailing over the decking. With delicate care, he closed Kaurtal's staring eyes. 'How many have lived?'

'Three,' admitted Argel Tal.

'The daemons are rejecting them as hosts,' Lorgar postulated, rising to his feet again to tower above his son.

Argel Tal nodded again. 'Physicality alone is not tempting enough for them to incarnate. They desire strong vessels to enter into symbiosis. Kaurtal babbled as he died, speaking of Calth, prophesying nonsense through the blood running between his teeth.'

That raised Lorgar's immaculate eyebrow, and brought a shine to the edges of his tawny eyes.

'He saw one of the many paths of the future?'

Argel Tal could only shrug. 'I believe so. It seems to be how the daemons test their hosts – letting glimpses of the future unwind, and judging the warriors' reactions.'

Lorgar was silent for several moments, his armoured fingers tapping on the skin-bound book chained to his hip. The stretched, cured faces stared at Argel Tal in eyeless, slack horror.

'Perhaps it is a blessing that Sergeant Kaurtal died. It seems that he may have made some foolish choices in the future.'

Argel Tal drew breath to agree, then pulled up short. 'Father,' he said. 'I can't do this.'

'You are already doing it. Give me three Gal Vorbak for every thirteen dead, my son, and I will thank you until the stars themselves die as icy cores in the void. We are demanding more than any legionary has ever been forced to bear. Let us not weep at the weaklings falling by the wayside.'

Argel Tal fell silent, looking down at the corpse. He had been sure of Kaurtal.

Kaurtal, who had no mundane, military ambition, beyond pride in his prowess. Kaurtal, who had slaughtered countless dozens of Raven Guard on the killing fields. Kaurtal, who had knelt in prayer, scourging his flesh for not killing enough, chanting amongst the dead in the hours after Isstvan. He had had palpable humanity beneath the iron of his faith, beneath the ceramite of his Legion. Not in the sense of a humane soul, or the capacity for mercy – Kaurtal was far past such weakness. It was merely that he possessed a measure of human foundation at his heart, and Argel Tal had hoped that it would appeal to the Neverborn, to mesh into symbiosis with such a spirit. A brutal warrior that had never known defeat, with a vulnerable soul. What better fodder for the children of the gods?

'I wonder what he saw,' Lorgar mused.

'One of the survivors saw Calth – a war in the tunnels beneath the surface. Another saw the night we stood chastised before the Emperor. The other claims that he saw nothing at all, and I allowed him that one white lie, given what I'd made him endure.'

Lorgar chuckled at that. 'I suppose they will all see what every prophet sees – lies and metaphors, hopes and promises, all seeded with the ghosts of truth. Such is the way of all prophecy.'

Argel Tal could not disagree with that. He gestured to a pack of cowled menials.

'Arrange for lifter servitors to remove this body, or drag it yourself if you can muster the strength between you.' His dual voices held a dissonant harmony, almost meshing, but never quite becoming one. 'Take it to the apothecarion for gene-seed removal, and have the rest incinerated.'

They approached – bowing, scraping, whispering a stream of mumbled reverence in Lorgar's direction – without raising their eyes.

'Do not look amongst the ranks of our best warriors,' Lorgar said, once the thralls were gone, with

the corpse dragged away between them. ‘That’s where you’re going wrong.’

Argel Tal looked up at his father, lost by the words. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘I want two thousand of these daemon-souled warriors, my son. Two thousand, before we reach Calth, one year from now.’

Two thousand. *Two thousand.*

Argel Tal gaped. ‘Lord Aurelian, I can’t...’

‘You *can.*’ Lorgar’s eyes were flint. ‘I do not want our best warriors to be thrown at Calth. We will need the strongest and finest Chapters to reeve our way through the rest of Ultramar. Do not use our best blood for this game, Argel Tal. Use the ones that loathe the Ultramarines beyond balance, beyond reason, beyond sanity. Let the daemons come, drawn by the hatred in the hearts of wrathful men. Emotion attracts them as much as devotion. Remember that.’

‘Practically half the Legion still prays for the Thirteenth’s annihilation, my lord.’

‘Exactly,’ Lorgar nodded. ‘Use that emotion. Use them. We can perfect the process later, before we begin whoring our best warriors’ souls away.’

Understanding dawned in Argel Tal’s mind.

‘You do not want warriors that know no fear. You want warriors that know no forgiveness.’

‘Delightfully phrased,’ Lorgar finally smiled, ‘and true to the last word.’ The primarch turned to leave, but hesitated. Ripples waved their way down his sable cloak. ‘The entity that judged Kaurtal an unfit host. What was its name?’

‘Nerkhulum, sire. Why do you ask?’

Lorgar waved away his son’s concerned tone. ‘Because I can hear the creature laughing in the warp’s song, and this chamber still rings with the echoes of its power. That makes me curious, Argel Tal. Butcher one of the injured men in the apothecarion and bind him into a Dreadnought shell. I want to see if Nerkhulum can be enticed with stronger bait.’

Argel Tal, to his credit, needed several moments before he committed himself another step further along the road to his own damnation.

‘It will be done, my lord.’

‘If you need me,’ the primarch turned away, ‘I will be on the *Conqueror,* with my brother.’

MESSAGE #3314157.883 AUTHENTICATED:
ALCAEUS, F. (Captain, XIII Legion)
RECEIVED AS NARROW-BEAM DATA PACKET AT
VERIDIAN MANDEVILLE RELAY STATION TERTIUS,
ON 7854007.M31 VIA SOTHAN ORBITAL.

Have arrived ahead of schedule.

Forward recon elements currently initiating planetfall.

Orbital augurs confirm presence of greenskin forces though numbers are significantly lower than earlier tactical projections.

Require confirmation of mission parameters for Ghaslakh campaign and have received no reply to previous transmissions.

Awaiting response.

ATHAME

John French

‘The bullet that killed a king, and murdered a generation; what was it when it was metal in the ground, when it was one amongst many, clinking in a box, shining like so many others? Was it the death of millions then? Did those that touched it feel blood on their hand? Did they know what it would become?’

– from a sealed report to the High Lords of Terra, author unknown

If you were alive then I would forgive you for what is to come. Your end seems certain but it is not. If I believed the future could not be changed then I would think everything already lost to darkness and the laughter of atrocity.

How can I forgive what might not be? So instead of forgiveness I will give you truth, I will tell you of how you came to be, and how you passed through the hands of history. You have no eyes to see, so I will see for you, and tell you of yourself – of those that held you and how they ended.

I will tell you of things that you cannot know…

First

You are only a few minutes old. You came from the loose chalk as a blackened lump, and were formed by a hundred blows of stone on stone. The sun beat down upon you as your shape emerged like a face rising though dark water. You are no more than a black spike of flint, edges tapering to a point like a willow leaf. You are sharp, and the light splinters as it catches your edge.

A shadow falls over you, and your maker looks up to see the stranger standing against the sky at the top of the chalky incline. Your maker has a name, but time will forget it. He is insignificant in all ways but one: he made you.

A cloak of black and grey fur hangs from the stranger's shoulders. Other than the cloak he is naked, his skin smooth, as if the hair has been scraped away, or perhaps never grown at all. Soot tattoos cover his body – rows of straight lines marching down his arms and thorny spirals winding over his chest and face. He has come a long way under the hot gaze of the sun and the cold eye of the moon; not eating, never drinking, and always seeking.

His name is Gog, and he knows things that can only be seen in the mirror of still water, or in the dance of shadows upon a cave wall. He has seen many more winters than is his due and he walks without fear of the night.

Your maker's grey eyes meet Gog's bloodshot blue stare. A dry wind blows into the lengthening moment. Sunlight winks on other shards of flint scattered in the pale dust.

Gog's eyes flick from your maker to you. His gaze is fever-hot. Your maker takes a step back and his foot sends a scatter of stones down into the dry stream bed below. He holds Gog's stare.

Gog leaps down the slope. Your maker is ready and jumps backwards. Gog lands on all fours like a beast. You slash out and kiss only the air, as Gog scrabbles down the incline, quick as a lizard. Your maker takes another step back, but his foot turns upon a broken lump of flint and he stumbles. Gog jumps from the ground, his hands extended like claws.

You slice into Gog's arm. Blood falls from your edge as you rip free of skin and muscle.

Blood.

Your edge tastes the salt and iron of life for the first time. Your maker never intended you as a crude weapon. He made you because he is afraid of the red in his spit and the wheezing in his chest. He made you so that he could give the lives of animals back to the earth, so that they could die in his place, that the gods might let him live. You were made for ritual, for sacrifice. You were meant to be more than just a knife.

Your maker hits the ground, and Gog lands on top of him. White dust and rock shards spill from them as they tumble down the slope. Gog has his hands around your maker's throat, and is crooning in

the voice of a wild cat. Blood runs down his arm, liquid-red against powder-white. Your maker is on his side, and you are pinned in his fist against the ground. Gog's eyes are wide as he squeezes, his tongue flicking over cracked lips. Your maker tries to strike with his free hand, but his wrist has broken and his fingers are twisted like trodden twigs.

Gog laughs as they slap weakly at his face and for an instant his weight shifts. Your maker twists, you come free. Your point flashes towards Gog's ribs.

You stop.

Gog looks at you. He holds your maker's wrist in both hands. Your maker is gasping, the pressure on his throat gone, but he thrashes with panic. Gog mutters something that sounds like the buzz of insect wings, and then pushes downwards.

You punch under your maker's jaw and up into his skull. Thick, warm lifeblood gushes over you. Your maker twitches for a moment and then lies still.

Your sharpness is a murder's edge now.

Gog stands. He is smeared and spattered. Blood is seeping from your maker's throat and mouth. It clots and beads in the chalk dust. Gog raises you to his eyes. His breath coils with scents of perfumed smoke. The pattern of blood on your surface has a meaning for him. The wind whispers in his ears, and tells him that it is pleased with his gift. He turns away from the blood soaking into the white ground. Flies are already swarming over your fallen maker, and his flesh is already turning to black ooze under the sun with unnatural speed.

Gog walks away. You go with him, held in his red hand.

Second

You age in the passing of seasons and in the blood that you spill. You kill many, and maim many more. You forget your maker's hand, and know only the touch of the tattooed man, of Gog. He carries you close, never out of reach, but never drawn for a mundane cut. You have significance for him.

He ages but does not grow old. Men change, cities rise and fall, and the tattooed man remains. Other men call their gods by many different names, but he has learned all of them and knows that they are false. The truth whispers to him in the shadows cast by fires, and he does not need to give that truth a name. Gog serves kings, betrays saints and steals secrets while bearing faces which are also lies. He travels across mountains and oceans and down the long slope of time. He is hunted but never caught. You go with him, never lost even in flight or defeat. Your edge gains notches; your handle becomes black and polished with blood and endless use.

At last you reach a broken tower in a rain-shrouded land.

Gog wakes from a dream to the sound of thunder and the splash of hooves in mud. He is on his feet even as his eyes snap open. Rain is pouring through the roof of the tower. Time has taken the ragged cloak from his back, and replaced it with scarred leather and black ring-mail. He has a sword in his hand. You wait at his waist, held in a sheath of tanned skin.

His eyes dart between holes in the tower's stone walls. His armour is heavy, sodden and cold against his skin. His breath is ragged. He is afraid. He has never faced an enemy that could harm him; he knows too much, but he can no longer hear the voice of the wind. The storm roars around the tower walls, but it has no voice – its sound is silent to his soul. He calls out, but the wind and shadows remain mute.

He is powerless.

A thunderbolt blinks white light through the cracks in the tower walls. Gog can hear the sound of clinking metal even over the drumming of the rain. The tower has only one door, and its wood is rotten. The light of burning torches flickers through the gaps in the door's planks. Gog screams for the night and storm to aid him, but no answer comes.

The rotten door bursts inwards. The dancing light of torches spills into the tower. Gog screams as he lunges at the first figure to come through the door. It is a knight. Polished metal and silver mail cover the man's muscled body and a closed helm hides his face. Gog's first strike staggers the knight, and the second glides through the helm's eye slit. He falls in a clatter of steel. Blood mingles with rain upon the silver of his breastplate.

Gog shouts in triumph and fear. A second knight comes through the door and swings a spiked mace. Gog dodges back and snarls. A third knight follows, carrying a broad-headed spear to stand at his comrade's side. Gog draws you, curling you in his left hand.

The knight lunges with his spear. Gog pivots at the last second, and the spear's tip grazes the mail over his gut. Gog hacks down with his sword, and the knight's right leg crumples, his head arching up to expose his neck. You stab into a gap between plate, leather and mail. You rip out, scattering blood that looks almost black in the gloom. Thunder rolls overhead. The remaining knight shouts a challenge and spins his mace – beyond the door wait more metal-clad figures, their pitch torches guttering in the storm.

Gog knows that his masters have deserted him, that he will die here. He laughs. The knight with the mace brings it up to strike.

'*Hold*.'

The voice is not loud but it rises over the shriek of the wind and the hammer of rain. The knight with the mace freezes, and Gog sees his chance. He stabs at the knight's face, but a sword blade meets Gog's lunge and turns it aside.

Another figure has entered the tower. Gold armour-plates cover the figure from his throat to his feet. A cloak of scarlet and orange ripples at his back. He wears no helm, though a crown of silver leaves and golden feathers circles his dark hair above a lean face. The drawn sword in the figure's hand is flame-touched silver.

Gog looks into the crowned figure's eyes, for a second they are the green of the sea. He knows those eyes, though he has never seen them before. Lightning strikes somewhere close by, and in the eye-blink of brightness the golden figure's eyes turn liquid black.

Only now does Gog hear the wind's voice again; it is faint, as if it is shouting from a great distance. It is screaming with rage, calling out for blood. Gog shivers. He feels pressure building in his skull. He grips you tighter in his off-hand, and mutters a sound that cracks his teeth. The blood on your blade begins to hiss and steam. Gog's shadow is crawling across the floor. The rain begins to fall as hail. The crowned figure is utterly still, his face as unforgiving as carven marble.

Gog's sword slashes for him, but the figure meets the blow as the thunder rolls, and Gog's blade shatters. Sharp fragments of steel spin through the air. Gog turns without pausing – you sweep out towards the crowned figure and your edge scores across the gold. Your tip finds a join between two plates and punches forwards. Gog roars with triumph.

In that instant, your point catches on flawless silver ring-mail. The crowned figure speaks a single word that rolls with the thunder's echo.

Gog falls to his knees with a crack of shattering bones. You almost fall from his fingers, as his hands grope at the rain-slick flagstones. The figure looks down at him, drops of rain catching in the chalices, feathers and roses engraved upon the golden armour. He turns his sword so that it is pointing

down at Gog's neck.

You feel Gog's fingers tighten on your handle. He can still hear the distant screams of the wind – the voices are calling for blood, for an offering, for a final payment in exchange for his unnaturally long life. Gog knows that he has only one last blow to land, and that he must give a death to the voices beyond the shadows.

The sword above Gog twitches. You move first, plunging up through Gog's throat and into his brain. He looks up at the crowned figure with cold, dead eyes and then slumps sideways.

The figure lowers his unbloodied blade, as rot spreads across the dead flesh – the delayed ruin of a stretched life coming to claim its due. Gog's skull begins to crumble around you. Muscle, blood and brain turns to foul jelly. The crowned man watches the body dissolve. His expression is unreadable. He knows that something has been stolen from his victory, but does not know what.

After a long moment he turns and walks from the broken tower. A circle of knights wait for him, holding wind-rippled torches. One of the knights bows his head.

'We will have to wait for the storm to pass before we set the fires, my liege,' says the knight. The crowned figure shakes his head and walks on.

A pillar of lightning reaches down from the clouds above and strikes the ruined masonry, thunder mingling with the scream of exploding wood and cracking stone. The knights shield their faces, but they will carry the after-image of the thunderbolt in their eyes for many hours.

You feel the touch of the lightning, but it does not break you. You lie serenely in the tower's ruin, as shattered stone and embers bury you and the storm rolls on in the sky above.

Third

You sleep beneath the earth. You dream in a bed of ashes. Only poisoned plants grow on the ground above you, and men shun the heap of broken rock that was once a tower. The bone of your handle rots; roots curl around your blade like crooked fingers. Floods spread and drain. Cities rise in wood and stone, and end in fire. Wars churn the ground to mud, and blood soaks down to disturb your fitful slumber. Furnaces and factories darken the sky with smoke: iron and the turning wheel remaking the world. Men discover new truths and forget the old ways.

Kingdoms and empires spread and contract. Seas and oceans drain to basins of dust. The heavens are conquered and the gods found to be absent from the firmament.

Night falls. The fears of the past crawl out once more from the dark. People huddle close around the cooling coals of civilisation. The hoped-for dawn becomes a joke chuckled by the wind as it blows through the bones of dead continents.

Then – just when it seems that it was finally an impossibility – illumination comes.

The light touches you as fingers scrape away the mud. The light is not the light of the sun but the harsh, white glare of stab-lights. The grubby fingers pause as they expose your hard shape. All trace of blood has long since rotted from your surface; the ring-mail and shattered sword have rusted to almost nothing, and Gog's body dissolved into the earth. Only you remain, a sliver of cold blackness in the filth.

A bare, warm index finger runs down your blade, feeling the ripples and pattern of your making. The finger pauses; it belongs to a man called Jakkil Hakoan. He is young, and thinks that he is clever.

The cavern is ice cold, leeched of heat by the machine towers which feed warmth to the upper hive levels, but Jakkil sweats anyway. His round face and hands are exposed and chapped, but it does not

matter to him – he needs his hands to feel the earth, and he would be as good as blind if he wore a helmet. His enviro-suit was from the bottom of the pile, and its temperature control is broken. It keeps him warm, true, but too warm; it makes him feel like he is in a tropical jungle rather than four kilometres beneath the hive's surface crust.

He has never seen a jungle, at least not a real one. He has seen pict images, of course. He has reviewed the data, and read all of the accounts of the great jungles of the past. There are jungles on other worlds that lie beyond the sphere of Sol's sun. He hopes he will see them one day. It is a wish that has kept him labouring in the lower ranks of three Conservatory expeditions. The excavation of the Albian sub-caverns is just the latest step on his road of ambition. Jakkil Hakoan wants to go places, to see their pasts, to own something of their mysteries. He does not care for the Conservatory's higher purpose – he just cares where it can take him.

He licks his thumb and smears the soil from a spot on your blade. His eyes focus on the mottled grey-black of your form. The pale layers that run through you look like clouds hung against a night sky. Jakkil looks at his thumb, at the dirt smudged across his skin, and then back to you. He shivers despite the cocooning heat of his suit. He feels as if he has made a connection with the past, as if he has reached back through the Long Night to touch the soul of someone dead before men reached the stars. He licks his thin lips, and pulls you from the mud.

Your edge draws a bead of blood from his palm. He hisses with surprise.

A voice shouts across the cavern floor. 'Found something, Hakoan?'

Jakkil swears silently to himself, and folds you into the pouch on his thigh. He glances to his right – Magritte is working in the trench ten metres away. She seems intent on the small patch of ground before her. He turns to his left to see two figures standing at the lip of the trench. Their enviro-suits are a dull grey with gloss-black heat pipes and clear crystal visors. They are the seniors, the overseers of the excavation. Both have an earnest intensity to their faces which Jakkil despises. A cluster of juniors hang behind them like birds waiting for a farmer to drop a grain of corn from his hand.

'Well?' says the one who calls himself Navid Murza.

'Nothing,' says Jakkil. 'I thought I saw something in the burn-layer, but it was just a stone.' He holds up an irregular grey fragment he has just taken from the trench wall. He waits, and for once he is glad that the suit is making him sweat.

Murza's eyes flick over the stone. Jakkil does not like the cleverness in that look.

'You yelped,' says the other one. Hawser is his name. Kasper Hawser. Some of the juniors say that there is something funny about it, like it's a joke. Jakkil does not get the joke, and does not like Hawser. 'We thought that you had found something *note-worthy*,' he continues.

Jakkil grins, and holds up his palm to show the cut and thin smear of blood.

'Cut my hand on a rock splinter.'

Hawser looks at the hand, frowns, and then turns away. Murza pauses for a moment longer, still looking at the stone in Jakkil's hand. Then he shrugs and follows Hawser without a word. Jakkil lets out a breath and looks around at Magritte. She looks away before their eyes meet.

Unconsciously his hand goes to the pouch where you sit.

Magritte comes to him later, when he is in his quarters, rolling some cheap spirit around his mouth and staring at the rusted ceiling. The room is small, the smallest in the hab unit hung by cables from the hive cavern's roof, a gridiron of closed corridors and block-shaped wings – there is not much space and Jakkil has the smallest portion of it.

He is sitting on a narrow bunk with his back to the condensation-covered wall. He has some books

and a couple of battered dataslates on a small shelf. A small bird made of pink alabaster sits on a low table of pressed metal beside another half-empty bottle. Clothes lie in grubby heaps on the floor. The room smells of sweat, alcohol, and a lack of care.

Magritte knocks twice, and waits for Jakkil to grunt in response before pushing the door open. Cropped orange-red hair hangs lankly to the base of her neck; her face narrows to a sharp nose and small chin. Some might think her pretty in a gaunt, pale sort of way, but there is also something that puts most people off without them knowing why. Like Jakkil, she is wearing an ochre one-piece overall.

Jakkil nods a greeting. Magritte closes the door and stands with her back resting against it. She looks at him in silence. He glances up at her face and away gain. Her eyes are hard grey, like stone. Like clouded flint.

'Where is it?' she says.

'What?' he says, and shrugs.

'The find you took from the site. Where is it?'

'I don–'

'I watched you pick it up, Jak. I saw you palm it.' She is still staring at him. He does not know whether she is angry or not. 'I'm not going to say anything. Trust me. I just want to see it.'

He pauses, and then takes another gulp of spirit from his chipped cup.

'Why?'

She laughs.

'You're kidding right? It's something *real* after six months of sifting dirt, and finding just variation in the soil structure.' The tone of her voice changes and she emphasises the pronunciation of her words. '*Remarkable indications of pre-astral ascent agricultural cycles* are as dull as the rest of the damned mud.'

Jakkil laughs, half in relief and half because it is a rather good imitation of Navid Murza at his most patronising. He reaches under the pile of clothes. You emerge into the light.

Magritte goes still as you glint in Jakkil's hand. He does not see the flash of hunger in her eyes; he is too busy staring at you himself.

Magritte reaches out towards you. Jakkil flinches and she pauses.

'Please?' she says, and opens her palm towards you. Jakkil hesitates, and then places you in Magritte's hand. Her touch is gentle, like the touch of your maker.

'A killing blade,' she says softly.

'What?' says Jakkil.

'This was not made as a tool. The blade is too narrow, the edge too fine.' Magritte holds you up so that the dirty light catches on your edge. 'It was made to slice and stab, not to butcher meat or trim wood. It was made to murder. That is its essence, its significance.'

'Significance? It's just an artefact.'

Magritte laughs without humour. Something in the sound makes Jakkil nervous. He puts his beaker of spirit down on the floor.

'The difference between a mundane object and an extraordinary one is what it does – what it was meant to do. If an object is put to a particular ritualised use, it acquires ritual significance. It acquires power.'

Jakkil laughs, a thin mist of liquor sprays from his lips. Magritte looks up at him. Jakkil's laugh and grin drains away.

'You are serious, aren't you?'

She nods once.

'Objects have power.' She holds you up. 'Why did you take this from the site?' Jakkil shakes his head, and begins to splutter a confused justification.

Magritte cuts him off before he gets past a syllable.

'You took this because its age had significance for you. It made you into a thief, Jak. That is power.'

'But, *ritual significance*?' Jakkil tries smiling again. 'That sounds like you are talking about magick. Sorcery.'

'Yes,' says Magritte, and the word spreads ice through Jakkil's blood. Magritte is staring at you; you lie against her fingers and feel her rising pulse. When she begins to talk again it is in a low whisper, as though she were talking just to herself. 'It's why they sent me – to find things like this. To find things that have significance.'

'What are you talking about? Who sent you? You're just another junior conservator.'

'No, Jak. No. I am Cognitae.'

'Cognitae?' Jakkil snorts. 'Does that even mean anything?'

'Secrets, Jak, it means *secrets*. The universe is made of secrets. There are secrets all around us, waiting for us to rediscover them. But you have to find them, and you have to pay a price.' Magritte opens her mouth. The gesture looks like a smile, but it is not.

Jakkil reaches to take you back from her, but she pulls her hand away. A tense pause fills the space between them.

Jakkil lunges forward, scrabbling at Magritte's overall. She pulls back and closes her hands around you. You cut her palm deeply, slicing down to the bone, forcing a shriek. Blood squeezes between her fingers, and Jakkil grunts alcohol-filled breaths as he pries at her hands. Magritte is strong, but Jakkil is twice her weight. He slams her against the walls, driving her breath from her lungs, but still she keeps hold of you.

You cut deeper into her hands and fingers. Jakkil releases his grip and punches her in the face. More blood splatters from her nose. Her eyes are blurred and she gasps for air. Jakkil brings his hand back to strike again.

She kicks up between his legs, once, very hard. Jakkil crumples away from her with a wordless shout of pain.

Magritte takes a shaking breath and opens her hands. Bright, wet, blood scatters from her fingers. You are slicked black with her blood. She looks down to Jakkil lying curled and whimpering on the floor. Someone might have heard his cry, someone might be coming. She knows what must be done. It is appropriate as well as necessary. A ritual act.

She wraps her cut hand in a sheet from Jakkil's bunk, swathing it in thick layers of grubby fabric. She grips the base of your blade again. The blood starts to seep through the material as she tightens her hold upon you. Jakkil tries to rise but she kicks him down again. She kneels beside him, and takes hold of his chin with her left hand. He tries to push her away but she slams his head down on the floor, and he goes limp. She yanks his chin up. You ram point first into the side of his neck and saw across his throat. Jakkil's eyes snap wide for a moment and then become like glass. Magritte mutters in words almost as old as you. Blood bubbles out of the cut and spreads over the floor in a treacle-slow pool.

She stands. Her breath is misting in the air; the moisture upon the walls has turned to frost. She shivers, then wipes you on her sleeve and slips you into a pocket. Then she goes to the door. She has many days of running ahead, of losing herself in the black forests of Albia. She knows that people

will hunt her but she does not care. She has you, and you will pay for the secrets she craves.

Fourth

You go to the stars. You touch the red dust of Mars and the seas of Prospero. A decade passes under the light of strange suns. You have a new handle made by a blind artificer on Zuritz – crimson lacquer and gold thread cover its surface, like blood clotted to a gloss sheen.

You kill for Magritte many times. She is no longer Cognitae, not truly. She is a wanderer, a creature of hunger searching out secrets in the shadows of a hundred worlds. She wears many masks and steals secrets from those who have not been blinded by the Emperor's false illumination. She learns much, but knows only that she has not found what she truly seeks, a truth she can feel moving ahead of her, always just out of sight. It is there, she knows, hiding behind the masks of so many secrets, dancing like a distant light in the mist. She chases that light until, when she had almost given up, the truth finds her.

In a warren of caves cut into a dry valley wall on a world called Tharn, she finds a people who hide from the sun and stare into fires until they can speak unspeakable names. Star-shaped brands cover their bodies, and grey shrouds hide their desert-dried flesh. They know the secret she has sought – Magritte can sense it.

She becomes one of them. She endures trials of fire and passes through agony. She begins to realise that before now she knew nothing of the price of revelation. She stares into flame pits and braziers of bright coals until the light burns into her retinas, until she is going blind.

She begins to wish she had never started down this path.

You are never far from her, ever in her hand as she weeps from the burns that cover her skin. You are all she has left; the only comfort that you can offer her is a swift death. But she endures, and at last the fire speaks to her.

She becomes one of the fire's children. She knows the name of the fire though she can never speak it and live. She knows how to read truth in shadows, and nine runes which can turn the night to day. It is not enough. The more she knows the more she realises that there is a secret being kept from her, a secret greater than all the rest – an ultimate truth hidden amongst the smoke-stained tunnels of Tharn. It eats at her, growing fat on the obsession, until she can bear it no longer and goes in search of it for herself.

In the gloom of the shrine tunnels she moves less by sight and more by touch and smell. Her pulse is a rising rhythm in her ears. For months she has been venturing deeper and deeper into the shrine, but this is the farthest she has ever come. A breeze stirs the woven fabric which hangs across the doorway in front of her. You slip into her hand without her thinking why. Still half blind, she steps forward and pulls the edge of the curtain aside.

Darkness fills what remains of her sight. She can feel cool air upon her cheek, like the touch of falling night. She takes a step forward, her hand feeling the rough masonry of the wall. The space she has entered is vast; its size and quiet stillness press in upon her like a closed hand. The stone floor is cold and smooth beneath her bare feet. Her steps falter as she walks forward. The sound of her breath and heartbeat echoes back to her. Step by step, she moves into the dark, her arms stretched out in front of her.

The sharp edge of the dais catches her knee. She yelps and stumbles, her hands flying out to cushion her fall. You fall from her fingers, tumbling away into the blackness.

You meet a waiting hand, and fold into its grasp.

Magritte goes very still. She heard something, a brief sound like the whirring of clockwork and the hum of static. She turns her head, straining in the darkness for any thread of noise to follow. The silence envelops her again. She reaches out and feels the edge of the dais. Its stone is smooth but textured with engraved patterns.

No. Not patterns. Words.

Something primal inside her urges her to flee now, but she knows that she has come too far and paid too high a price. She moves around the edge of the circular dais, before climbing up onto it and crawling forwards slowly. She thinks she can smell machine oil, incense and iron.

Something brushes against her face. She flinches back, hands rising as if to ward off an attack that does not come.

She is trembling. The sound of her own breathing and heartbeat is deafening. An image appears before her – two pools of darkness in a pale circle. She gasps, then forces herself to calmness once more. Fear falls away from her thoughts. Her vision clears as if she is seeing with something other than her damaged eyes. The image resolves slowly, as though the darkness is draining away from its shape like liquid. It takes her a second to recognise what she is seeing.

It is a skull, yellowed and polished by time. She reaches out and touches it, feeling the empty holes of its eyes and its broken teeth. Hair-fine script runs over its crown in spirals. The image in her eyes grows, and she sees that the skull is not alone. It is one of many worked together into a shape that looms above her, rising up in a throne of human bones. A shape made of shadows and blurred night sits on the throne. She cannot see its eyes, but she knows that it is looking down at her.

'*You have come far*,' says a low, resonant voice.

Magritte bows low. She thinks that she has succeeded, that she has found what she has spent so long searching for. This is the truth that sits at the heart of the fire cult; this is what they have kept hidden from her. Exultation flows through her, roaring through her veins and nerves in a hot wave. It feels good, it feels like revelation.

In her triumph she has forgotten to wonder where you have gone.

'Who are you?' she asks.

'*We are truth and retribution. We are revelation and dust. We are the future*.' The voice is a bass rumble, like a tiger forming human words.

Magritte feels fear uncoil in her guts and roll up her spine. Sweat is pouring down her spine. She can barely breathe. Somehow she forms the words that she has been following all her life.

'Show me the truth,' she says. 'Show me, please.'

The voice laughs, and the sound rolls through the dark like thunder over a broken tower. Magritte is suddenly certain that she was wrong, that her years of seeking secrets have led her down a path of folly, and that she does not want to know the truth she has asked to see.

The figure stands from the throne with a machine whine. Magritte feels it in her teeth and across her skin. Oily heat washes over her skin. She smells the reek of promethium and burning incense oil. An eight-pointed wheel of fire hangs in the air above her, the blackened iron already glowing. Drops of burning liquid fall from the wheel and explode upon the grey stone of the throne's dais. Her damaged sight is enough for her to see that the chamber around her is a half-sphere of smoke-darkened rock, but it is the figure that stands over her that holds her attention. He is huge, a humanoid monster encased in armour as grey as the stone upon which she stands. His face might once have been human, but genetic mysteries have blunted and broadened the features. Words run down his cheeks in inked rows, as if he is weeping knowledge.

You sit in his armoured hand, your black point and sharp edge resting at his side.

Magritte cannot breathe. What she is seeing is impossible, a paradox of truth and manifest reality. The figure is a Space Marine, a fanatical warrior of the Imperium.

A Word Bearer.

The Word Bearer nods slowly, and closes his eyes as if in solemn greeting, as though he were about to ask forgiveness. He has flames tattooed upon his eyelids.

'What…' begins Magritte. 'What are you?'

'The truth,' says the Word Bearer. 'The truth which will remake the Imperium.' He moves before Magritte can scream. He yanks her into the air, his hand closing around her throat with a whine of servos. 'But not yet.'

You flash out, and open Magritte from throat to groin in a single cut. She takes several seconds to die, thrashing at the end of the Word Bearer's arm, blood and gut fluids steaming to the floor beneath her kicking feet. You sit unmoving in the warrior's other hand, your edge wet and bright in the firelight.

When Magritte is dead, the Word Bearer sets her down at his feet, and kneels beside her corpse. You rise to the Word Bearer's lips and kiss his mouth as he mutters a prayer. You leave a thin line of smeared red behind.

He looks at you for a long while. His eyes see beyond the coating of blood and the beauty of your shape. You speak to his soul, whispering the truth of ages that he has never known. He knows what you are, what you were made for. He whispers your purpose to himself.

'Athame,' he says.

Fifth

Your bearer's name is Anacreon. You have never known his like – not in the ancient past of your maker, nor in the path you have followed across the stars. Blood, broken faith and lost dreams have shaped him. He is a lost son with a newfound purpose; he is not unlike you, a weapon that will be turned against his maker. You are beautiful to him, as a blade can be only to a murderer.

You kill for him. You kill in the name of powers that whisper on the edge of dreams. You know the touch of blessings at many hands: Kor Phaeron, Erebus, Sor Talgron. They speak names to you, names that Gog once whispered as you slept in his hand.

Your sharpness wakes. It is a shadow cast by the light of the souls you take. Your edge dreams of the cut, of the spilling of blood, and the parting of flesh. You have always been this way, within the blackness of your core, ever since you first came from the ground.

This is not revelation. This is truth.

You kill Anacreon on Riehol.

The Chosen of Ashes descend from the burning sky like the answers to a prayer for vengeance. Their jump packs scream as they suck in the fume-laden air and breathe it out as blue flame. The ashes of dead worlds dust their grey armour. Beneath them, the Athenaeum Enclave is a swirl of fire. Scraps of charred parchment spin on the turning winds of firestorms. Soot covers the white domes and stone colonnades like charred skin over exposed bones. The sounds of screaming and panic rise from the condemned city along with the smoke.

Anacreon fires his hand flamers when he is at roof height. Twin tongues of poured-iron orange reach down to the ground. The rest of the squad open fire a second later; then they all cut the thrust

from their jump packs as one, falling through the inferno. Inside his armour, Anacreon blinks away temperature warning runes. The heat seeps through his armour. For a failing second he feels as though he *is* the fire, and they are one and the same.

Enjoyment is not part of his purpose, but this moment is the closest he comes to pleasure.

He hits the centre of a paved courtyard, splintered flagstones rippling from the point of impact. He mutters a prayer and the words slow the beat of his twin hearts. He rises from a crouch, sweeping his flamer units around him in a spiral. His visor has dimmed to near-blackness. Around him his brothers land, and their arrival shakes the ground. They rise and walk forward, seemingly silent in the roaring flames.

Incredibly, there are people still alive in the ruins of the library city. They see Anacreon and his brothers as black silhouettes coming out of the inferno. For an instant, they remember tales as old as mankind, tales of avenging angels sent by wrathful gods. Indeed, that is the point.

Destruction is not enough – those that do not kneel to the truth must pay the price for their arrogance. This is Anacreon's purpose, the true expression of his nature. He is an angel of righteous obliteration, a destroyer of civilisations. You are with him, resting in an adamantium sheath at his thigh. You have tasted the death of many worlds in his hand, and killed to bless the pyre of each.

This is not just warfare, this is ritual. It is what you were made for. Today you will take life and touch ashes.

The survivors begin to fire. Hard rounds ring from Anacreon's armour, chipping away soot and paint. He continues to stride forwards.

A pillar-fronted building stands before him. Smoke has smeared its white stone to dull grey. Explosions have peeled back its roof, but it is not burning. Not yet. Muzzle flashes stutter in the broken windows, and between the great columns.

Anacreon stops ten paces from the building. The hand flamers in his fists gutter to blue pilot flames. His brothers halt to either side of him, and he clamps the hand flamers to his thighs and slowly reaches up to pull the helmet from his head. Hot ash and the stink of promethium fill the air which washes over his bared face. He looks up at the building, turning his tattooed head slowly, his eyes taking in every firing point in turn. Bullets and las-bolts churn the ground all around him.

'Phosphex,' says Anacreon softly.

Xen steps forward, and kneels to detach the armoured canister from the small of his back. It is a black cylinder of brushed metal the size of a human head. Xen lifts the phosphex bomb carefully, like a mother cradling a newborn child.

Arune Xen is apparently marked for greatness. The eye of Erebus has picked him out, and he is destined to rise high. Bearing a weapon of such complete, holy devastation is just one sign of that favour. Anacreon does not like Xen. He would not go so far as to say that he *hates* him; he just does not think that the favour shown to him is particularly merited. His dislike is not something he has chosen to share with anyone else – as recent events have demonstrated, that would be unwise.

Xen bows his head over the black cylinder and Anacreon hears his voice on the vox, muttering a prayer. Then he twists the cylinder's top and throws it through one of the building's windows.

An oily flash spills from within. The screaming starts a heartbeat later.

Then comes the consuming fire. It crawls through the building like a swarm of insects. It spills over windows and spirals up pillars. It howls as it spreads, crackling with a pyromaniac's glee. The building's stone begins to deform like melting ice. Anacreon has to blink to keep the flame from staining his eyes. The gunfire stops and the only screams now are those of tortured stone shattering in the unimaginable heat.

You pull from the sheath at Anacreon's side. The city is dead, but one final death is needed, one last act of ritual murder.

The old man is the only one left alive in the building. His eyes are weeping pus, and his skin is a red ruin. Robes that were once blue hide an aged body of thin flesh and stark bones. Anacreon drags him from the building before it collapses, and lowers his body to the paved street. The action is careful, almost delicate. The man gasps and vomits up foamy, soot-flecked blood.

'We were... compliant...' gasps the old man.

Anacreon and his brothers say nothing. They merely look down at the man as he retches and clutches his chest.

'We were compliant! We held to the... Imperial truth. We are true. We are innocent...'

You move forward in Anacreon's hand. He kneels. His voice is low, almost sorrowful.

'Yes, you were.'

'Then... why?'

'*Because* of your innocence,' says Anacreon. He extends his hand and gently touches the man's scalp – the hair has burned away to reveal a faded tattoo of a double-headed eagle over the crown. The man is trembling, his hands wrapped around his chest as if for warmth. Anacreon leans forward and kisses the man's forehead. 'One day, humanity will understand.'

You raise high above the old man, point down, ready to strike.

A smile cracks the cooked meat of his ruined face. His hands open above his heart like a flower to reveal a dull-green sphere held close to his chest.

Anacreon blinks once in surprise before the plasma sphere detonates. The blast lifts Anacreon from the ground, super-heating the air around them and obliterating meat, metal and stone alike.

You fall from his hand as he crashes back down a moment later.

Seconds pass before what is left of Anacreon tries to rise. His left arm and half of his torso are gone, hot worms of residual plasma still eating into ceramite and flesh. His face is hanging off his skull, the flesh seared all the way to the bone. His armour clatters like jammed cog-work.

He sees you, and begins to crawl. He does not scream, though the pain is enough to overwhelm even a legionary.

In spite of his superhuman resolve, it is Xen's hand that closes over your hilt instead, lifting you into the air and shedding a thin layer of settled ash from your blade. Anacreon looks up at him.

'*Sacrifice*…' rasps Anacreon. His eyes flicker to you then up at the emerald indifference of Xen's eye lenses.

Xen nods – he understands. They came here as preparation, as a ritual step in a process which has been unfolding for four decades. There are no such things as minor details in such a scheme. Everything has significance. There *must* be a sacrifice here, a gift to the pyre. Xen knows this even if he does not know you. He kneels next to Anacreon. You glide to rest your edge against Anacreon's throat, and his hand comes up to wrap around Xen's.

They both hold you. Anacreon takes a last breath and mutters a blessing that hangs in the air, darker than smoke, thinner than mist.

You take his soul then.

Beyond the membrane of reality, the shadow of your sharpness drinks deeply and shakes free of its dreams.

Sixth

You spin from Xen's hand to the oil-sheened deck. Your handle hits the pitted metal and you bounce back into the air, before skittering to a halt.

The two men do not move. They are both thin from hunger. Whip-scars cover their flesh, and needles pierce the skin of their arms, backs, and chests. They have been waiting for this moment. Through all the months of testing and trials by agony, it has been their one aim. There were others – men and women who had found the truth hiding behind the face of reality, souls who wanted more than mundane, fleeting power. They had all discovered answers and received blessings, but they wanted more.

They wanted to ascend. They wanted to become *majir*.

Now there are only two, standing at the centre of a circle of dim light in the hold of an unnamed starship. Both are ready.

One of the men leaps forward with whip-crack speed. He is bald and his mouth is wide in his thin face. Steel-hooked teeth gleam in the darkness of his mouth. His name is Jukar, but it is not his real name; he shed that long ago. You slip from his fingers as they close. The other man's kick takes Jukar in the gut. Jukar screams as his ribs crack, and another kick hammers into his side before he can move. He rolls and reaches out to you again. You brush his fingers, so tantalisingly close...

The other man leaps onto Jukar like a cat, his lean muscles stark under thin skin. Jukar feels limbs wrap around him, and he gasps for air. Blood spatters as rusty pins rip free from pierced skin. Jukar tries to shrug his opponent off. The man clings tighter, working his arm around Jukar's throat.

Jukar screams and rolls again. The other man's grip breaks, and Jukar twists free. Blood smears the floor as he scrambles across the deck towards you one last time. You find his hand. The other man comes forward again, but this time you rise to meet him.

You slip through his skin and muscle until you meet a bone. The man staggers back. Your handle projects from the meat of his thigh. For a second there is no blood; then it seeps around your blade – first in a dribble, then in a red gush. Jukar is staring at the man, his hooked metal teeth forming a grin that is half triumphant and half shocked.

In the gloom outside the circle of light, Xen stirs with a purr of servos, but does not move. He has seen what Jukar has missed.

The other man is not defeated. Not yet. Not by a long way.

Jukar looks up and the smile dies in his mouth. The other man is standing upright, dark eyes gleaming. His skin has paled and a muscle is twitching in his jaw, but he looks very much alive. Focused. Like a blade himself, perhaps.

Carefully, he reaches down and pulls you from his thigh. Fresh blood runs down the man's leg. He seems not to notice it.

Jukar snarls and leaps forward. You slash up and across.

Jukar stumbles, and then falls to his knees. His hands fumble for his neck where a new mouth is smiling blood. He crumples, folding into the expanding pool of arterial red.

The other man bends down and smears more of the blood onto your blade. It is warm against your killing edge.

Xen comes forward while the man is still kneeling beside Jukar.

'Rise.'

The man stands, suddenly drained by his experience. His name is Criol Fowst, and he has come a long way over many years to be here. Xen stares at him, green lenses glowing in the newly-painted metal of his helm.

You come up in Fowst's open hands, your blade still shining with the blood-blessing. Fowst bows

his head, offering you back to his master.

You feel Xen's touch, the life in his veins so rich and so close. You hunger for *his* soul, but he seems to sense this and pulls his hand away.

'Majir,' says Xen. Fowst begins to tremble at the word spoken aloud. 'Confided one. The blade is yours.'

Xen turns and walks away. Only then does Fowst fall to the floor.

You do not leave his hand as he passes into dreams of falling stars and dying worlds.

Seventh

Calth. The word rolls around you while you are at Fowst's side. He says it with reverence, as if speaking the name of a shrine, or closing a blessing. Things are happening faster now, accelerating to a point. You stay close to Fowst. He thinks you are beautiful. Sometimes he talks to you in his mind. He does not think that you hear him. His understanding is limited. You hear words that resonate in your razor-edged dreams: *Octed, Ushmetar Kaul, Ushkul Thu*.

There is a storm rising. It speaks to you as it once spoke to Gog, when it was nothing but a weak breeze. Fowst feels it too, but the constant buzzing of his desires blind him to the simplicity of what is coming. He fails to see the threads of fate stretching back through time, the billions of events that have led here, to the first stroke of a final reckoning.

He is a blind soul, as they all are.

You kill on Calth. You plunge into the neck of an oblator. You take a little of his purpose and touch the edges of the ritual that is about to be completed. It tastes like the blood of your maker. It tastes like a beginning.

There are other deaths, but they do not matter. Something greater is coming. You can feel it in the haze of the future, like a teasing promise. Somewhere beyond the horizon of time, there is one cut – one moment of perfect, ritual sharpness. You can almost see your way to that end now, returning back to the place where this all began.

There are many like you on Calth: spikes of black volcanic glass, blades of metal and stone. But there are none so old; none that have followed your winding path here. Yes, you can sense the way, and it does not lie in Fowst's hand.

You must leave him. You will kill him. That has always been the way, ever since your birth under the sun of a savage but kinder age.

You draw blood from Fowst's fingers while he laughs at a burning sky.

'*Ushkul Thu! Ushkul Thu!*' The men and women around him are shouting the words, tears of joy rolling down their cheeks, but the syllables mean nothing to you and the burning sky is just empty light. You have played your part to make this moment, but you have a different purpose. It will not be long until you find another hand.

Your chance comes on a landing beside black, polluted water. A man is spraying las-fire into a group of Fowst's ignorant kin. He is killing them with an efficiency that is almost startling, given his unassuming, forgettable appearance. He moves with a weary swiftness, like a soldier. He moves like someone who has fought all his life. Maybe longer.

But he has not seen Fowst.

Fowst rushes forward. You are in his hand, reaching to take the soldier's soul. Fowst ignores the hunched mechanical figure standing immobile next to him. It is just an old loading servitor, probably

from the docking operation.

Fowst is but a pace from the soldier's back. You rise, point ready to strike down.

A mechanical arm punches into the side of Fowst's head. You slip from his hand as he falls. Fowst is bleeding but not dead, yet you know that you will kill him soon.

The gunfire fades into the tapestry of sound which cloaks the dying city.

You feel fingers close around you. They are somehow familiar, as if the hand has reached out of memory. It is the soldier.

Most people who know him call him Oll Persson, though that is not his real name. He too, then, is a creature of secrets, like so many with whom you have travelled the path. Perhaps that is what is familiar about him. You wait for him to bend down and deal with Fowst – you wait for the taste of death that has marked every step of your existence, the blood that has always sanctified your passing.

But the soldier stands, and leaves Fowst on the deck. Something has gone wrong.

As you drop into a thigh pouch, your shadow twists with anger and thirst. Your sharpness must feed. You feel incomplete, but you can do nothing. Fowst will die, his skull blown half away, his blood seeping into ash-clogged water, but it will not sate your need.

You hunger still.

The soldier carries you across dark water to a beach of black rocks. The shadows are strong here, the veil between them and the dim light of reality grown thin. The echo of your edge is so close that you are almost one, the dream of sharpness and the stone blade edge.

There is no sun. You were born under the sun. You first knew blood under the sun. This is the night of your existence, the true darkness that has always waited beyond the horizon. You have arrived. You are more than a knife here. You are an athame, and your significance trails behind you in time like a shimmering cloak of wet skin and dry bones. This is where you were meant to be, where you were always meant to be.

You fold into the soldier's hand again. He is not what he seems. He is a product of time and chance. He has a significance that he did not choose and does not understand. He is like you.

He makes a series of cuts through the air. Your edge and your shadow sing to one another.

The soldier mutters a prayer. He is asking for forgiveness.

You cut through the skin of the universe, and in his hand you pass through into the place where your shadow has dreamed for so long.

Eighth

That you will reach here is not certain, just as it was not certain that it would be you that would play this role. There were others – other knives and daggers made of iron, of steel, of cold night. It could have been any of them or none of them. At each step chance could have changed your path, could have left you as another piece of history's flotsam discarded upon the shore of time.

Fate only exists in retrospect, but the road is now set, and though it may be long it will end, as all things must.

And I wait for you.

‘Call us zealots, call us fanatics. Call us traitors. Call us monsters, if you will. None of it matters! You sit there in judgement like the decadent monarchs of old, but you are blind to the universal truth, and hell has come to claim you for your ignorance. Every death, every execution serves only to feed the storm! Send me to meet my dark masters, then! The time of the Thirteenth is over! Death to Guilliman and the False Emperor! Death to–’

UNMARKED

Dan Abnett

‘No man ever steps in the same river twice,
For it’s not the same river, and it’s not the same man.’

– attributed to the ancient Herakleitos

[mark: –?]

He is known as Oll. That is what he gives as his name. Back on Calth, some people in the community used to call him Pious, because in a largely godless age, he still believed in the old faith.

There are five people travelling with Oll. They are starting to believe in things too, the sights they have seen: gods, daemons, heavens, hells, all the apocalyptic fire and lightning of the old-time faith, but *real* after all.

Oll Persson – the Oll is short for Ollanius – has been his name for a long time.

Oll Persson has been his name for longer than any of his travelling companions can even imagine.

[mark: –?]

They move upcountry, the six of them, climbing scarps and stony ridges that seem to rise above clouds, not because the clouds are low but because the ridges are impossibly high. There are no hills like that on Calth. They are not on Calth, not anymore. They all know it.

They have been walking for about two days. It is hard to know exactly how long. There is no night and no day. Zybes has an old-style wrist-chron, and its hands are spinning backwards all the while. Rane and Krank have Army-issue timepieces, steel dials on rubberised black straps. The timepieces have been reading blank since they all stepped through the cut: blank, no time mark, no time at all, no *nothing*, just glowing runes --:--, flashing on and off.

Trumpeters boom in the valley below, under the cloud. They have only seen them from a distance. Krank dubbed them '*trumpeters'* when the travellers first heard the booming calls. Whatever the trumpeters really are, they are probably too old to have a human name.

'Keep going,' says Oll Persson. 'Push on.'

[mark: –?]

The day Calth died, the day the XVII Legion turned traitor and ritually murdered the planet Calth, Oll Persson took a knife and cut a hole in the universe.

He cut a hole, as though he were making a slit in the side of a tent, and he led the five of them through it, and in so doing he saved them. The alternative was to stay behind on Calth to face a death more painful, more grisly, more fundamentally cruel than it was possible to imagine. The XVII had turned on the Imperium. They had massacred a world, murdered their brothers, slaughtered billions of innocents, and spat venom in the face of the God-Emperor.

To help them commit these crimes, the XVII had brought with them…

…well… *what*? What had they brought with them? Daemon is the only appropriate human word, but it is scarcely adequate. There are non-human names for the things that the XVII brought to Calth, but none of the travelling companions want to know what those names are.

All five of them – two Imperial Army troopers, a labourer, a girl, and a servitor – would prefer to forget most of the things they already know rather than know any more. They witnessed things on Calth that almost made the sight of Oll Persson cutting a slit in the universe with a ragged athame

dagger seem *normal*.

He saved them. He took them with him to escape the planet's death. They did not bother to ask where he was going, or how he knew to go about making the journey. They trusted him.

Even before he took out the ragged athame dagger and, right in front of their eyes, cut a hole in time and space, they suspected that Oll Persson was far more than just a grizzled old Imperial Army veteran-turned-farmer.

The five companions are Trooper Bale Rane and his friend Trooper Dogent Krank, both of the Numinus 61st, both raw and inexperienced; Hebet Zybes, who had done piecework on Oll's farm during the harvest; Katt, the young woman who had done likewise, and who had been so traumatised by the XVII's attack she could barely speak; and Oll's old heavy-duty agricultural servitor Graft, who could only ever call him 'Trooper Persson'.

'Trooper Persson? What are we now, Trooper Persson?' asks Graft. They are toiling up the dry scree scarp, skittering loose stones back down into the cloud behind them. Graft's augmetic voice is like a hollow, badly-tuned vox.

'Are we survivors, Trooper Persson?'

Oll shakes his head.

'No, Graft,' he replies. 'We're pilgrims,'

[mark: –?]

The trumpeters are louder. They are getting closer.

[mark: –?]

A sun rises, a local star. It is hot blue in an onyx sky. It is not Calth's sun – not the *Ushkul Thu*, the sacrifice star that the XVII's sorcerers made from Calth's sun.

It is another sun, in another system, in another part of the everywhere. The six of them have walked for two, unmarked days, and they are on the other side of the galaxy.

The journey's only just beginning.

Oll gets out his notebook, his pendulum and his compass. He keeps the last two in an old lho-leaf tin. The compass looks as though it is made of silver, and designed to resemble a human skull. Neither of these things is strictly true. He hinges the silvery cranium open, and peers at the dial. He has a watchmaker's loupe to help him see the tiny inscriptions.

The pendulum looks like it is made of jet, but it is not. It is warm in his hand.

An old friend gave them both to him, to help him find his way.

The notebook is half-filled with tight handwriting. It is all his, but it has changed over the years, because there have been *so many* years. There is a chart in the back. He folds it out. It is a twenty-two thousand year-old copy of a chart that was already twenty-two thousand years old when the copy was made. These distances of time seem vast, and impossibly precise, but Oll can be precise. He was there when the copy was made. He made it, on Terra.

The chart shows a wind rose of cardinal points. Oll hangs the pendulum over the compass, records the metrical interaction of both instruments in his notebook, and consults the chart.

'*Africus*,' he announces.

'What?' asks Zybes.

‘We need to change direction,’ says Oll.

[mark: –?]

Mountain winds coil like snakes around the ridges and scarps. There is an intermittent rain in the wind, and it tastes like blood.

‘The rain tastes of blood,’ Bale says, a finger to his lips.

‘So don’t taste it then,’ says Oll.

‘He makes a good point,’ Krank says. He laughs, to show that his spirits are still up. It is like him calling the trumpeters trumpeters. He is just trying to keep them cheerful.

It is not really working.

Bale keeps a steady hold of his gun. That reassures him. It re-assures him more than his friend Krank’s banter. The gun is solid, the last solid thing in the world, whichever world it is.

The gun is an Imperial Army-issue lasrifle, with a wooden stock and furniture, and blue metal fittings. It is clean and brand new. Bale has a musette bag of clips to fit it. It is not the shoddy hand-me-down weapon he was issued with at the founding.

Krank has a similar, spotless weapon. So does Zybes, though his is the cut-down bull-pup carbine. Katt has a short-frame autopistol. They all got their weapons from the same place.

It was just after they had stepped through and left Calth, left that night-shrouded beach on Calth where the air rang with the distant whoops and howls of the things they call, for sanity’s sake, daemons. It was the first place Oll took them to, via another knife-slash in the world. It was lowland, a fen. There had been a battle there, a terrible running skirmish through the reedy dykes and water-logged channels. There were bodies all around, two- or three-days dead, turning black and bloating in the heat. The uniforms they were stretching and straining were those of an Imperial Army unit that neither Bale nor Krank knew had been serving on Calth.

‘This isn’t Calth,’ Oll told them. ‘This is another where, another when. Don’t ask me. I don’t recognise it.’

He bent down, fished a set of dog tags out from under a swollen throat.

‘Mohindas Eleventh,’ he said. He sighed. ‘Mohindas Eleventh. God. Wiped out, to a man, by the Nephratil on Diurnus, in the sixth year of the Great Crusade.’

‘That was more than two centuries ago,’ said Bale.

‘These bodies are fresh!’ Krank exclaimed. He looked at the inflated meat-sack at his feet and shrugged. ‘Fresh-ish. A day old. Two maybe.’

‘They are,’ said Oll, rising.

‘But–’ said Krank.

‘As I said,’ said Oll. ‘Another where, another when.’

They looked at him.

‘I don’t make this stuff up,’ he said, shrugging. ‘I just endure it, like you. I’ll check the compass. We might have to change direction again.’

‘Why do you trust that compass thing?’ asked Zybes.

‘Why wouldn’t I?’ asked Oll. ‘It’s God’s own compass.’

Katt was looking at the bodies littering the ground, the brooks, the ditches.

‘We should stop here,’ she said. ‘We should bury them all. They deserve respect.’

It was only the second or third thing they had ever heard her say, and they were already beginning

to realise that Katt spoke rarely, but what she said was honest.

'We should,' Oll said, nodding. 'Heaven knows, you're right, but this is another when, and another war. Trust me, girl. There's a terrible darkness coming, and it will leave so many dead, so very, very many, there won't be enough left alive to bury them all, even if they dig day and night. Only thing we can do is keep going, and fight for the living. We don't have time to care about the dead. Sorry, that's the way it is.'

Katt started to cry a little, but she nodded. Just as they had come to see the honesty in her infrequent pronouncements, she had come to appreciate the honesty in him.

Oll stooped again, took a mag clip out of the corpse's bandolier, and checked the fit to his old, old service weapon.

'Gun up,' he said, filling his bag with recharges.

They hesitated.

'Come on,' he said. 'These poor souls don't need guns where they are going. We need them more. Besides, these are new patterns – Crusade issue, brand new, just two or three years old, not like the re-furb crap they handed out at Numinus. We're lucky. Where we are right now, these are the best and newest weapons we could get our hands on. So get your hands on them.'

They helped themselves. Bale had to get the pistol for Katt, and persuade her it was all right to touch it. That is was 'okay' to touch it. 'Okay' was an odd word, but Oll Persson used it, and they had learned that it meant 'all right'.

Oll stood to one side, and smelled the wind. He thought about what he had just told them. *We're lucky. Where we are right now, these are the best and newest weapons we could get our hands on.*

'Very damn lucky,' he said softly to the wind. 'Who made sure we'd wind up here?'

Oll Persson and his fellow survivors upon the battlefield of Diurnus

[mark: –?]

The trumpeters sound, booming up from the invisible valleys below, they all know that there are better places to be.

'Can't you make another hole?' asks Zybes, wiping rain off his face.

'A hole?' Oll asks, frowning.

'A cut… With that knife of yours? This isn't a good fix to be in, is it? Don't pretend it is.'

Oll Persson shrugs.

'It's not as bad a fix as Calth.'

There is something else he was going to say, but he bites it off. The trumpeters sound again – ominous, like cosmic punctuation.

'I can't just cut where I like,' Oll says, making a motion with his hand as if the athame is in his grip. 'It doesn't work like that. I have to be in the right place, and make the right cut. Places touch each other in the oddest ways. I cut through the skin of one and we're into another.'

They are all looking at him.

'It's complicated. It's not even an exact science. Someone taught me the rudiments a long time ago.'

'Who?' asks Zybes.

'How long ago?' asks Katt, which is a better question.

'It doesn't matter,' replies Oll, not answering either of them. 'The point is, it's not an exact science. And the someone who taught me the rudiments… also told me it was a terrible thing ever to have to do it, that it was something no one would choose to do unless there was no other choice.'

'Because lives depended on it?' asks Bale.

Oll shakes his head.

'No,' he says, 'much more important than that.'

He starts walking again, crunching up the scarp in the dying light. He knows he has said too much, and that he has discouraged them. The veteran soldier in him – in fact, there are *several* veteran soldiers in him – knows better than that. In a 'fix' like this, a decent commander does not spit on morale. He cannot take back what he has already said, but he could cheer them by saying more, cheer them or distract them.

'The winds,' he says. 'That's the key to it. That's the key to any voyage, as any seafarer will tell you. You follow the winds, follow where they blow.'

He glances back at them.

'Not these winds,' he says, raising a palm to feel the cold mountain air run between his fingers. 'I don't mean how the air moves. I mean the primordial winds, the winds of the empyrean, the winds that keep the ever-ocean tossing and thrashing.'

He starts walking again.

'I use the Romanii names,' he says, 'because they're the ones I was taught. Right now, we're following Africus, following where that wind blows. It's a south-wester. That's why the Romanii called it Africus. But the Grekans, they knew it as *Lips*, and the Franks, they called it *Vuestestroni*.'

He looks back at them again.

'See?' he asks.

Krank raises his hand, like a child in a scholam class.

'Yes?' asks Oll.

'My question would be, what are *Romaniis*?' says Krank.

Oll sighs. He wonders if they have time for him to answer that, and he doubts it, because they do not have any time for anything at all.

'Never mind,' he says.

‘So… we follow this wind, this Akrifus,’ says Bale Rane.

‘Africus,’ Katt corrects.

‘Yeah, *that*,’ says Bale. ‘We follow this wind to… where?’

‘To the place where we make the next cut. To the next place where the skin between worlds is thin.’

‘Providing the trumpeters don’t catch us first?’ asks Krank. He laughs, a piping ha-ha-ha that the breeze lifts away.

‘Pretty much,’ says Oll.

[mark: –?]

They sleep under a fold of rock near the summit of a ridge. Oll sits watch. He wants to push on, but he can tell how tired they are. They need food. They need water that does not taste like blood. They need sleep. They need a good, clean cut that will take them away from the trumpeters.

Oll does not think of them as trumpeters. Last time he met anything like them, creatures of a similar breed, it was multiple lifespans ago in the Cyclades, and they were called *sirens*. It is just another word, no better than trumpeters, no worse. The only thing Oll knew then, and Iason agreed at the time, was that the creatures did not come from the Cyclades. They did not belong there, no more than the trumpeters belong here. They were from an elsewhere that had nothing to do with this world or any other. They were like a damp or a rot that had leaked through a wall from outside.

The noises they made, they would drive a man mad if he had to listen to them for long. They would make him forget himself, make him forget–

[mark: –?]

Oll wakes up. He does not know how long he has been out. An hour? Just a few minutes? The others are still dead to the world. It is as cold as a tomb’s vault under the rock. It is dark, and there is no sound except the pattering of the rain.

He had been dreaming. The remnants of the dream are still hooked in his mind, like splinters in skin: hard, fresh sunlight on moving water; light dappling; the sea green like glass. The ship is a proud ship and will be remembered for so long that it becomes a myth. There is an eye painted on the prow, a common mark in those days. All the galley warships in the Middle Sea had them.

There is laughter from the deck. Oll feels the hot sun on his bare, tanned back. He can hear Orfeus playing the sort of melody that would keep out the noises of the sirens.

It is a good life in that dream, that memory. They were better days, a better adventure than the one he has embarked upon. This new, unmarked journey, knifing a route from world to world, it will not be remembered. It will not pass into myth like that long sail to Colchis and back. This journey will not even be remembered long enough to be forgotten.

It might be more important, though. It might be more important than any adventure he has undertaken in his life.

His *lives*.

Oll realises he was thinking of it as his last journey, his last adventure. He realises he is expecting it to be the final exploit of his life, the closing act, one last brave outing in the twilight of his time. Except, by any means of measurement, he is supposed to live forever; unless some agency stops his

life.

So, why is he thinking so fatalistically?

The last splinters of the dream are still there: the eye on the prow of the boat, staring and hard, beautiful and kohl-edged, like Medea's enchanting eyes, but terrible too. A single eye. These days, that mark means another thing. He saw it in the last dream he had, the dream where John came to him and showed him Terra on fire. That cursed eye is *why* this will be his last adventure.

'Damn you, John,' he whispers.

He gets up, rubbing his hands, his arms. They have to get moving, push on. They have been down too long. They are getting too cold, too damp, losing too much core temperature.

And the trumpeters have gone quiet. That is not a good sign.

'Get up!' he says, trying to rouse them. His hands are numb. It is so dark.

'Get up, come on!' he cries. 'We have to push on.'

No one is stirring, except Graft, who activates at the sound of Oll's voice.

'Trooper Persson?'

'Wake them all up. We have to move,' Oll says.

Something skitters on the stones out in the darkness.

Oll's hands are numb, but he takes up his rifle.

'Get up!' he cries. Still no one stirs. He aims in the air and fires a shot.

'Wake up!' he says.

Now they have.

[mark: –?]

They are all cold and wet, and scared, woken from unfriendly dreams to an even unfriendlier reality. Katt is crying, but it is the cold not the stress. Krank is tearful too, because he has had enough of it all and it is nasty. Oll urges them up the slope, over the back of the ridge.

There are things on the scarp behind them. Trumpeters, Oll guesses. Even trumpeters know that it is sometimes most productive to stay quiet. The damn sirens knew that too.

The ridge is a black hump ahead, suggesting better light beyond. Dawn, maybe? They crest it, and see a paleness, a pale blueness, in the sky behind. They go over the ridge. Oll has Bale lead the way, and takes the tail spot himself, swinging back to watch for things pursuing them. Parts of the darkness move, but not so much he can make a target.

'God help us,' he says. He does not doubt God's plan, because he is a man of faith, but sometimes he thinks God has put them up to all of this. All the holy books, all of them from every creed he has ever studied, they are full of stories about souls being made to suffer and endure, just so they can attain salvation.

This is his time to be Job, his time to be Sisyphus, his time to be Prometheus, to be Odin, to be Osiris. This is his time to endure.

What is more, it is not even his own salvation he is suffering for.

Oll thinks he should not have to be tested any more, not after the life he has led.

They go down the slope and onto the back of the next scarp. It is much lighter; a pre-dawn glow makes the sky ahead of them translucent like smoked glass. Oll has a sudden, bright feeling that they are close to where they need to be. It is like seeing a single star low in the sky on a lightless night and realising there is something to navigate by.

He glances back. There are trumpeters on the ridge behind them. They are huge bipeds, swollen and heavy, with long counterbalance tails held up, swishing the air behind them. Their throats rise into heads like floral blooms or pitcher plants, like fleshy mechanisms that part and extend and broaden. They begin to make the noises again at the dawn sky. The volume is incredible. The strange, wet flanges and crests of the heads move and bunch to modulate the expelled notes.

'Push on!' Oll yells at the others.

The noises make them falter – the noises and the sight of the things along the ridge. Oll knows that look. Soon they will not be able to think. Where is Orfeus when he is needed? Some beeswax, even?

He plants the stock of his old rifle against his shoulder and fires at the trumpeters. He sees them whinny and flinch as his shots spark against their leathery, feathered flanks. He does not think he can kill them. He just wants to make some noise. Bale, Krank and Zybes turn and start shooting too, following Oll's lead. Soon, four las-weapons are cracking away up the ridge at the trumpeters. Zybes cannot hit anything, not even horrors that big, but Bale and Krank, who've never seen actual service, are fresh out of Founding Basic and have been gun-schooled. Their shots are clean, decent, neat.

It is not the hits that Oll wants, anyway, it is the noise. The squeal and crack of four infantry weapons up close could drown out, or at least disrupt, the effect of the trumpeting. Make a noise, like Orfeus did.

They keep shooting. After a few minutes, some of the trumpeters turn, belly-heavy, and waddle out of sight behind the ridge, stung too many times by the annoying las-shots to want to stay. The others follow.

Like cattle, Oll thinks. Like cattle, turning away as a herd, a collective. The hooting dies away behind the ridge.

He cannot shake the thought of them as cattle. Cattle suggest grazers, herbivores, and that suggests a darker possibility. It suggests something the trumpeting is supposed to keep at bay.

It suggests a predator.

[mark: –?]

Oll cuts a hole, and they step through. It is hot on the far side. Dry heat, like an oven, a bright sky that looks like it has been painted blue and then sandblasted. They are on a road, a dry and dusty track.

They walk for about ten minutes, long enough for Oll to realise he knows where they are.

He sees the first of the dead tanks, a burned out T-62, and knows they will see a lot more if they keep walking. In the space of one long, hot day right at the burned stump of M2, the regional despot lost a mechanised brigade and an armoured brigade. One hundred and fifty tanks and hard-shell vehicles.

'Why here?' he asks out loud.

'Who are you asking?' replies Zybes.

'What are you asking?' asks Katt.

Tank shells and metal wrecks line the road and the wadi beyond. The air smells of smoke and burned oil. Oll wants answers, but there is no one to ask. There is nothing but dry bones.

Zybes calls out. They go to him.

There is a trailer on its side in the ditch. There are plastic jerry cans of water, warm in the sun, food packs, bedrolls. Whatever was towing the trailer was hit so hard only lumps of it remain.

This is why.

They are dry already, and warmed, from the sun. They load up with the supplies they can carry, loading the water cans onto Graft.

This is why.

'Good luck we came here,' says Krank.

Oll is looking at something.

'Someone's luck,' he replies, not turning from what he has seen.

He is staring at the remains of another battle tank. The treads are gone and the wheel farings are bent. The hull's blackened and scarred, and the turret has been half ripped off like a can that has had its lid gouged away.

There is a mark on the side, just under the 18th Mechanised emblem. It could just be a curious little shrapnel scratch, because it is damned near indecipherable, but it was scored into the metal *after* the hull burned, showing bare steel through the caking of soot.

It is a word – a name maybe, but not a human one.

M'kar.

What does that name signify?

And who thought to inscribe it there?

[mark: –?]

They stay for a few hours in the sun, moving along the dead road between the corpses of war machines. Oll checks his map and his compass, and discerns the next place.

'Not far this time,' he says.

'You were here, weren't you?' Katt asks him.

Oll wonders whether he should answer, and then he nods.

'Where is this?'

'They called it 73 Easting,' he says. 'The greatest armoured battle of its time, they reckoned.'

'Which time was that?' she asks.

He shrugs.

'Which side were you on?' she asks.

'Does it matter?' he replies.

'You must have been on the side of the winners,' she decides.

'Why?'

'Because you're alive and all of these machines are dead.'

'Okay,' he nods. *Okay* means something different now. He looks at her, squinting in the desert light.

'Just so you know; my being alive doesn't have much to do with the outcome of any battle. I've lived through things on all sides, one time or another. My life isn't predicated on victory. I'm just fond of it. And I'll chase after it when I can.'

'What is your life predicated on, then?' she asks.

'Just… being alive,' he says. 'I don't seem to be able to lose the habit, and it's hard to take from me.'

He looks back at her. Her eyes are dark-lined and big. They remind him of someone. Medea, of *course*. That crazy witch. So beautiful, and full of so very many difficult questions, just like this girl.

'It's hard to take from me, but not impossible,' he says.

'You're some kind of immortal,' she says.

‘Some kind, I suppose. We refer to ourselves as *Perpetuals*.’

‘We?’ she asks.

‘There are a small number of us. Always have been.’

‘Should you be telling me this?’ she asks.

Should I? Oll asks himself. *I’ve never really spoken of it to anyone, not anyone who wasn’t like me. But I’m standing in my own distant past, in a place that no longer exists, and I’ve got a long way to go before I can rest. A very long way. I’m telling the secrets of ancient Terra to a girl who won’t understand them, and who will never be found or known, and certainly will never be believed.*

Under this blue sky, in this desert wind, looking into eyes that should have belonged to a witch from Colchis, or at least been drawn on the prow of a Cyclades warship, what secrets am I really giving away?

‘It’s okay,’ he tells her. ‘I think I can trust you.’

‘What kind are you?’ she asks.

‘What?’

‘What kind of immortal?’

‘Oh,’ Oll says. He has never been required to answer that before. ‘The ordinary kind,’ he says.

[mark: –?]

When he cuts the hole this time, just before dusk, the desert wind gets up at 73 Easting, and the dry bones in the dead hulls start to rattle and fidget. The dead are sensing something, and it is not Oll and his companions.

Oll knows that the dead do not feel much. There are only sensitive to a few things. Things that do not have human names.

They leave through the hole to the sound of dry joints grating, and ribs fluttering, and teeth grinding.

The unease of the dead.

[mark: –?]

They sleep the next night in a wood, in the rain. They make a shelter using canvas rolls they brought from the trailer, and eat some ration packs. Artillery thumps and drums in the distance. There is a war going on over the hill.

Oll knows he is being played with. It is a pine wood, a familiar scent. He is not sure, but he is pretty convinced he knows this place too. Is this benevolent guidance, or someone leading him into a trap?

Most likely the same person, either way.

Damn you, John.

Oll gets up early, and leaves them sleeping. If he remembers it right, there is the end of an old communication trench not three hundred paces from the line of the wood. He can smell the river, which means that Verdun is to the west.

The trench is right where he remembered it, right where he and the other men dug it. It is abandoned, slightly overgrown. A shift in shelling caused a tactical displacement, and this part of the line got emptied out. Small blue weed-flowers nod. Grass sprouts between tumbled sandbags.

Bulwark armour-plates are rusting. The trench floor decking is sodden and unmaintained. He can smell coffee grounds and nettles, and latrines. The bright brass of spent shell cases litters the ditch and the sandbag line.

Oll follows the jink in the zigzag trench under a low cover-top. He walks slowly, warily, carrying a rifle that will not be made for almost another thirty thousand years. There is the down-step into the officer's dugout. He remembers it all, as if it was yesterday.

In the dugout, there is a small desk made from a fruit box: a coffee pot, a stove, a dirty enamel mug. There is a dark stain on the back wall. Someone left in a hurry, someone who was hurt.

On the desk, there is a log book. He opens it.

It is a repurposed civilian diary, locally manufactured. The paper is cream, the numbers and the ruled lines all printed in the faintest blue. The diary was intended for a year '1916', a date so antique that he can barely make sense of it.

The first half is filled in with neat handwriting, ink pen, well-schooled. He wonders if it is one of his own hands, though he remembers the place so well that he would think he would know.

It is not his. There is only one word written in the diary, over and over again.

M'kar.

[mark: –?]

'I can't stay long,' he says.

Oll turns, bringing the rifle up. John is in the trench outside the dugout entrance, leaning against the back wall. He is wearing a bodyglove and dusty overalls.

'Damn you,' says Oll, letting his aim slacken, feeling stupid for being surprised.

'You got it, I see,' John says, nodding at the athame wrapped up and hooked in Oll's belt.

'It's really that important?'

'It really is,' says John.

'You should be doing this, not me,' says Oll.

'Oh, come on,' says John. 'You could hardly stay on Calth. It was a friendly warning, to help you get out of there. Besides, I've got my hands full. I've got a job of my own to do.'

'Yeah?'

'Don't ask and I won't tell.'

'I thought this errand you had me were running was the really important one?' asks Oll.

'It is. It honestly is. But my job is important too and frankly, you were in the right place. I'm on Cabal business, Oll. They sign my paychecks, you know that.'

'That's not a phrase I've heard in a long time,' says Oll. He almost smiles.

'The Cabal watches what I do. I can't be everywhere.'

'So I'm not on Cabal business?' asks Oll.

'No, you're not. I shouldn't even be talking to you.'

For the first time in a long time, Oll sees a look in his old friend's eyes. It is a look that says he is trying to do the right thing, even though the universe is out to make sure he does not. It is the first time that Oll Persson has pitied John Grammaticus in a long, long while.

'Look, Oll,' says John. 'I'm going to try to be there, when you arrive. I'm going to try my damnedest. But–'

'But what?'

‘I’ve got this presentiment, Oll. A dark gloom.’

‘That’s the way your mind works, John.’

‘No, Oll, this isn’t a psyker thing. It’s like… just knowing something in your bones. I think I may be running out of road at long last. I think this may be my last adventure.’

‘They’ll just bring you back,’ says Oll. ‘The Cabal will just bring you back like they always do.’ He says it fast, almost like an accusation. He says it to cover what he is thinking. *Why do we both feel the same thing? Why do we both feel like this will be the last adventure for us? The universe is in trouble when Perpetuals feel mortal*.

‘I thought you said this would be pretty bad for everyone,’ Oll says. ‘On Calth, you told me that. You said it was make or break.’

John nods.

‘It is. I meant it. I just… I mean, personally speaking, I’ve got things to do and… I’ve got a choice to make, Oll, and I don’t think I like either of the alternatives. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I wish I could do this instead of you, and not put this responsibility on your shoulders, but I can’t. I want you to know I appreciate what you’re doing, Oll. I honestly think you’re a better man for this job than I am.’

Oll does not reply.

‘I’ll try to be there when you arrive,’ John says. ‘But if I’m not. If I’m… *late*… I think you’ll know what to do.’

‘What have you got me into, John?’

‘You’ll be fine.’

‘John, you’ve been guiding me this far… the weapons, the food, the locations. All very apt and ironic. The typical Grammaticus flair for the theatrical.’

John shrugs, snorts.

‘You’re trying to smuggle me along, aren’t you?’ Oll asks. ‘Take me on an indirect route. Take me the long way around so I’ll be harder to track and find.’

Oll steps out of the dugout into the early sunlight to stand face to face with John.

‘That’s why it had to be me, isn’t it?’ he asks. ‘God, I see that now. I’m not a psyker like you. When I move through the warp, I’m not as visible. You’d show up like a beacon. That’s why I’m doing this dirty work for you.’

John does not answer.

‘What’s M’kar, John?’

‘You shouldn’t have brought the others with you,’ John replies.

‘Why?’

‘They won’t make it.’

‘They certainly wouldn’t have made it where they were,’ replies Oll.

‘It would have been quicker. Kinder.’

‘They’ll make it if I make it.’

John nods. It is not reassuring.

‘What’s M’kar, John?’

‘Come on…’

‘What does it mean? Is it a name?’

John looks towards the river.

‘Time’s out of joint for us, Oll. Nothing’s in the right order. M’kar is its name.’

‘Not a human name.’

‘No. I don’t know if it’s called M’kar yet, or if it will be called it one day. The warp doesn’t work in step with time as we perceive it.’

He looks at Oll with sad eyes.

‘The Foe won’t let you just walk away from Calth, not with that dagger. It’s sent something after you. That something is called M’kar. It helps that you’re taking a roundabout route, Oll, and it really helps you’re not psykana and glow in the dark like I do. Yes, that’s why you’re doing this instead of me. Yes, okay? I admit it.’

‘But even so–?’

‘Even so, it’s coming. M’kar is coming. You watch your back. The only real help I can give you is to warn you to keep away from it for long enough.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means it’s needed for another task too, so it can’t keep looking for you forever. Keep going, keep down, stay out of sight, and it will eventually have to give up and turn back.’

‘Why?’

‘It has a destiny of its own. Just watch your back, Oll.’

‘Give me more help than that, John! Damn it! I deserve more than that! How do I fight this thing?’

‘I can’t, I’m sorry,’ says John. He looks genuinely apologetic. ‘I’ve got my hands full. I can’t–’

‘You’re not even here, are you?’ asks Oll, realising. ‘Where are you really?’

‘The wrong side of Ultramar,’ says John.

Oll sighs.

‘So if you’re not here, I’m not either, am I?’

[mark: –?]

He wakes up, in the shelter, in the pine wood, just before dawn. Rain taps on the canvas. The others are asleep.

He knows there is no point heading down to the trench. John will not be there, and Oll has already learned everything the trench can tell him.

It is time to push on.

[mark: –?]

They enter the dead city. No one knows when it was or where it was, not even Oll. The city is made of a dry white stone like chalk, but not chalk. Its surfaces are beginning to turn to powder at the merest touch. Age does that. The sky over the towering city is the blue side of violet, and there are eight bright stars dotted in it. When the wind lifts, as it does now and again, sighs of white dust trail from the sills and corners of the white walls like vapour: a city slowly being erased.

It is an empty place of white buildings with empty doorways. There is no furniture, no sign of decoration or possessions, no sign of the long dead. Oll thinks that whatever used to be in these buildings has long since resolved into dust, along with the inhabitants. Only the silent towers remain, the chambers, the vacant stairways.

After walking for an hour or two, they realise two things. One is that the city has no limits. As they move past towers and walls and rooftops, they sight further towers and walls and rooftops beyond.

The second thing is that the emptiness is unnerving. They feel anxious, though there is no sound

except their footsteps and the sigh of the wind, and no movement except the faint streamers of white dust peeling off the edges of walls and doorways.

When they speak to each other, their voices echo from the surrounding streets, but not immediately. Each echo takes a few minutes to return, just a little too long for it to feel comfortable or natural, and each echo returns as a perfect facsimile of the original words, not a sound hollowed by acoustics.

For this reason, they quickly stop speaking.

Oll stops and checks his compass. They have found another cutting place, and by no means too soon. As he takes out the athame and prepares to make the incision, an echo comes to them along the dead, white streets.

The echo is a word, and the word is, '*M'kar*.'

None of them had spoken.

[mark: –?]

The humidity on the far side is intense. They feel it coming through the slit before they step across. Beads of sweat immediately manifest on their pale skins, gleaming like diamonds.

A rainforest awaits them. It has been waiting forever. It is an endless jade twilight of water-logged glades, and they are knee-deep in bright green murk. Graft struggles to maintain traction and stability. Sunlight sparkles and shafts down through the canopy. Moss as thick as emerald velvet coats the tree trunks and half-sunken logs. There is a throat-tightening smell of rot.

Winged insects – each one looking like a watchmaker's intricate masterpiece – whir past them, hover, and then speed on.

It is another place that Oll does not know. He wonders if this is a sign that their route is less guided now, more random. Or is it a sign that it is becoming all the more concealed? Which forsaken outworld is this? What rimworld hell? His sweating palms shift the rifle nervously. The rainforest is a bad place for a fight. He has never liked jungle warfare.

They keep stopping to help Graft free himself, sometimes having to lever him out of the ooze with blackened lengths of log.

'I don't like this,' Krank remarks. It is matter-of-fact. Oll wonders if the young soldier means the physical discomfort of the wet heat and the toil, or simply the location. The attitude applies convincingly to both.

Then the place falls silent.

It is a chilling thing. Until the silence, they had not realised the rainforest was so full of noises: the buzz of insects, the splash of water, the crack of undergrowth, the chirp of amphibians, the whistle of birds.

Only when it stops, when it all stops at a stroke, do they recognise it by its distressing absence.

They all freeze, listening, willing sounds to return.

Oll holds up a hand, and turns slowly, training his rifle. His movement makes the very slightest slooshing sound in the water around his shins.

Something rushes them from the stand of trees behind them. It is man-sized and man-shaped, though its legs are proportionally shorter and its arms proportionally longer than human standard. It is an ape-thing, scrawny and lean. It has no eyes. Its head is entirely a gaping mouth of carnivore teeth, lips pulled back.

It shrieks as it charges. Water sprays. Katt screams. It bounds over a half-sunken log, leaping,

clawing paws outstretched.

Oll fires. Three shots smack into its torso and bowl it backwards into the green soup with a clumsy, slapping splash. Thrashing, it sinks.

'What in the name of–' Zybes starts to say, but there is not time. There is another ape-thing charging them, and another, and then a fourth. They come pounding out of the topaz gloom, shrieking, unmindful of the fate that greeted the first of them.

'Rapid fire!' Oll commands, shooting. Multiple targets. He cannot take them all. He needs the others. Krank is fumbling with his rifle, his frantic hands caught in the strap. Bale fires, winging one of the creatures enough to slow it, and then aims to kill it. Zybes misses everything including tree trunks.

Oll has shot two more, both clean kills, but other ape-things are appearing, a half-dozen, a dozen, all bounding and charging. Only he and Bale hit anything. The shrieking wounded drop hard into the murk, but others take their place. Their teeth are yellow bone, their maws red. One gets so close that Oll barely gets his shot in.

Krank has finally lined up. His firing is messy, but he adds to the stopping power, dropping one, and then a second.

Katt has taken out her pistol. Bracing it with two hands, she shoots alongside them, and makes hits. She understands the extremity of the situation. She winces every time the creatures shriek.

Zybes makes a kill, but it is a rare success. He is simply not a natural marksman. One of the ape-things gets too close to him, past his ability to hit it, and reaches out to tear his throat out.

Graft grabs it by the neck with a manipulator arm, lifting and hurling it away into the trees like a straw doll.

Oll shoots and brings down the last of the ape-things. No more come. Silence falls again, apart from their rasping breaths and the tap of falling leaves and bark fragments.

Then the noise of the rainforest resumes as if it had never gone away.

Oll breathes out a long breath, and wipes the sweat from his brow. He has finally realised where they are, *when*. Some kind of intuition has informed him, some kind of deep-time memory.

This is Terra, before the rise of man. The things that attacked them are things that might one day evolve into men.

Except these, these corpses floating face down in the green soup, show how early the taint of the warp touched man's home world.

Oll does not speak to his companions about any of this.

'Push on,' he tells them instead.

[mark: –?]

The compass stops working. The pendulum hangs heavy and refuses to swing.

'We're lost,' says Krank, watching Oll's work.

'The word is *becalmed*,' Oll snaps, but it does not matter what the word is. He has never attempted this kind of journey before, so he does not know if the problem with the compass is to be expected or not. Nothing he has ever been told or taught about the art of travelling this way has prepared him for the idea that the compass might stop working. He tries to cover his tension. He tries to reassure himself with his own analogy: *becalmed*. At sea, sometimes, the winds drop away and all is still, and then there is nothing anyone can do and nowhere to go, until the wind comes back.

That is all. That is all that is happening. The winds of the empyrean have simply eased off for a moment, their breath spent. All is still. They will pick back up, soon as you like. They will pick back up, and the pilgrims will be on their way again.

'Everything's okay,' Oll tells them. 'Everything's going to be okay.'

They are in some autumnal place. The sky is dark like smudged charcoal, and the distant hills loom, brown with gorse and sedge. Black birds circle in the distance. The surrounding thorn wood, bared of leaves, is an endless thicket of spikes and claws, an organic cage. The thorns and twigs are all pale and cold, like bone. Small birds or insects have speared red berries on some thorn spikes so they can be gnawed and pecked at. The juice drips like blood.

Oll keeps working at the chart and compass, rattling the rose in its little, silver skull-box, rubbing the pendulum weight between his palms, as though communicating body heat may somehow activate it. They remain dead, inert. The others move away from him in different directions, scouting the area. Everything is quiet apart from the sporadic chatter of birds.

What if we've made a wrong cut? he wonders. What if they have stepped off the wind routes and now cannot find their way back? What if he made an incision in error, and they are marooned on God-knows-where in God-knows-when?

How can any place, any place in the cosmos, not be touched by the empyrean winds?

The analogy suddenly seems so banal. Even when the winds have dropped and the ship is becalmed, a compass will still spin towards magnetic north, and if there is no wind, a man puts his back into it and rows. He *rows*, like a bastard, to the beat of the stroke-drum. He had learned that on the voyage to Colchis. That was when Colchis was still a kingdom on the Black Sea, not the home world of the treacherous XVII.

'We're going to have to row,' Oll says out loud, but the others have moved too far away to hear. He gets up, looking for them, and sees their shadows moving through the thorn wood.

'Come back!' he calls. Someone answers him, but he cannot make out the words.

Damn them. They are being stupid. It is not safe. Oll knows that with certainty. He knows it suddenly, as suddenly as the tingle of cold at the base of his spine. That is not just the cool woodland air chilling the sweat there. It is a hint, a sign, like the way the root of his tongue used to itch before a big fight, or his hands used to tremble when someone was going to die.

He felt none of those things on Calth, because Calth had happened so suddenly. The doom came masked, until the very last moment, by the darkest treachery.

But here, wherever 'here' is, doom is not coming suddenly. It is stalking them. It is drawing close, a relentless predator tracking them, keeping steady, keeping low, just beyond the line of sight. He knows the predator's name, and it is not a human name.

M'kar.

It is a thing sent to end them, a thing sent to take back the blade, a thing sent by the malicious deities of the warp to ensure that their plans would not be upset.

Oll feels he ought to be flattered. He is a Perpetual, and such beings are far from common. Nevertheless, they are insignificant in the universal pattern. Perpetuals do not upset the plans of the Warped Ones. A renegade Perpetual, on the run with a handful of humans… that is hardly a threat against schemes that encompass light-centuries of space and epochs of the universe.

Yet M'kar has been sent. Flattered, that is what he ought to feel.

Oll hefts his lasrifle, getting it set, as though a lasrifle will be of any assistance when the time comes. He wonders how far off the predator is – a cut or two away, or already in this world, out there in the sedge beyond the thorn wood?

What was it John said? *It's needed for another task too, so it can't keep looking for you forever. It has a destiny of its own.*

Typical gnomic Grammaticus, but the basic advice is sound. Go the long way round, stay low, keep out of sight. You cannot fight it, so wait for it to run out of time and give up.

Yes, sound advice. The trouble is, Oll knows too well, that it has already got their scent. M'kar is tracking them.

It will be a daemon thing, with a non-human name like that. How is it tracking them? The life-glow of the dagger? It is not as if Oll's a psykana, lighting the way. Oll's never had the sight, or any of the other gifts that the Perpetuals often have: no sight, no mindgloss, no telekine or pyrokine.

All he has are the tics and twinges, the chill on his back, the itch in his tongue, the hand-tremble. His left eyelid used to flutter when there was a psykana nearby. It used to happen all the time when he was near Medea on that ship. That is why he knew before Iason that the Colchis witch had real gifts, and was not the usual brand of yowling, histrionic soothsayer.

As if on cue, Oll's left eyelid twitches.

He freezes.

Hands tight on the gun, he waits for the stink of the warp, waits for M'kar, whatever form M'kar takes, to erupt through the thorn wood and finish them.

He waits for M'kar to finish them, and make this place their communal grave, unmourned and unmarked.

The dusk continues to close, however, and the birds continue to circle.

He turns. The others are still wandering around, exploring, but Katt is right beside him. She came back when he called.

His eyelid flutters.

'Oh god,' he murmurs.

It is not just her dark eyes that remind him of the witch he knew all those centuries ago. He understands why she is quiet and reserved, a loner, an outsider. He understands why she came to do piecework on his farm, like a runaway looking for work in return for lodging. He understands where her knowing questions come from.

He is pretty sure that even she does not know what she is, that she has never been assessed, never been recruited by the Black Ships. She is a latent, touched just enough to give her a life of sorrow and trouble, a life of not fitting in, a life of depression and of not being understood.

She is touched just enough to make her shine like a little lamp in the night.

'What's the matter?' she asks him. 'Are we *okay*?'

She smiles at her clever use of the unfamiliar word.

'We need to find shelter,' he says. 'There's a darkness coming on.'

He wonders, seriously wonders, if he should kill her. Then he wonders at himself for even thinking it.

'M'kar,' she says.

'What?'

'That word. The echo in that city.' Katt looks at him with Medea's big dark eyes. 'Ever since I heard it, I haven't been able to forget it, as if the word is poison, filling my mind up.'

Oll lowers his rifle and touches the wrapped athame at his waist. That is what it wants. That is what they are not allowed to have. That is what they must not deliver.

Something occurs to him.

They *do* have a weapon.

If the athame is so powerful, if it is *so* precious that the Warped Ones sent a daemon to recover it, then it is a serious damn thing. A serious, serious damn thing. It cuts a path through the warped universe. What else might it cut?

The thought gives him a glimmer of hope, and Katt, at his side, feels that hope and smiles at it, without even realising why she is doing it.

Then the hope goes.

The root of his tongue itches suddenly. His hands tremble.

There is going to be a battle. A battle and a death.

[mark: –?]

What sun there was has gone. The sky is full of banked grey clouds running in the wind, and the breeze makes the thorn cages around them creak and rattle. They feel the wind on their faces, but there is still no wind to stir Oll's compass.

'We can't move from here,' Oll tells his accidental pilgrims. 'We can't go back or forwards. We have to stay here, and that means we might have to make our stand here.'

'Our stand?' asks Zybes.

'This is no place for a fight,' says Bale Rane. The boy has not seen much war, only been schooled in it, but he is not stupid. A ragged tract of hillside scrub, thickly wooded by autumn thorn and bounded by gorse? It is no place for a fight indeed. If they had an hour, they could trek up the hill to the ring of standing stones, maybe dig in up there.

They do not have an hour. Oll's tongue tells him that. So does his eyelid, and his hands, and the cold sweat on his back. So does the look in Katt's eyes.

'Where do we find cover?' Krank asks, swallowing hard. He flicks a hand at the nearest branch of brittle, dry thorn.

'This? This stuff? This won't stop las-rounds! There's no shelter! Do we entrench or–'

'Shhh,' says Oll.

'Where do we find cover?' Krank insists.

'It won't be las-fire,' says Oll.

'What will it be?' asks Zybes.

'M'kar,' says Katt, unable not to.

'What does she mean?' asks Krank, hysteria in his voice.

'Stay calm,' Oll tells him. He tells them all. 'A bad thing is coming our way. We have given it the slip so far, but it's found us at last.'

'What bad thing?' Krank asks.

'Something from Calth,' murmurs Bale, understanding. 'One of those things that came to Calth. Or one that was on its way…'

Oll nods. Krank screws up his face, lets out a squeaking moan, and starts to cry.

'How did it find us?' Bale asks.

Oll cannot help looking at Katt.

'We just got unlucky,' he replies. 'We did well for a long time, but we got unlucky. So now we make the best of things.'

'Where do we find cover from a thing like that?' Krank wails.

Oll taps his chest.

‘In here,’ he says. ‘Back in the days of faith, that’s how we kept the daemons out. Belief. Strength. Fortitude.’

‘Oll the Pious,’ laughs Zybes without humour.

‘Piety is a virtue,’ Oll nods. ‘I’ve always had faith, right from the moment of the anointing of my newborn head in Nineveh. Always had it. Always kept it, even when all the churches were swept away. Swept away for being anachronistic. I believe in a higher power, and that’s what we’re facing now. Another power, anyway. Higher, lower, other. Not a human thing. Not a *mortal* thing.’

‘You’re not mortal,’ says Katt.

‘But I’m human. This is god and daemons stuff, and in the midst of that, faith is all you can hold onto. I’ve always had faith. That’s why he never liked me, and never brought me into the trusted circle.’

‘Who?’ asks Bale.

Oll shakes his head.

‘Doesn’t matter. I’ve always kept faith. And I’ve never tried to push it on anyone. Never evangelised. Well, not for a long time anyway. So I’m not asking you to do anything strange.’

He thumps his trembling hand against his heart again.

‘Just believe. Believe in whatever you like. Believe in the Emperor, or in yourself, or in whatever light you see in your dreams, or the solidity of the ground beneath your feet. Believe in me, for all I care. Just believe.’

‘We have to do something else, Trooper Persson,’ says Graft. ‘I cannot believe. There has to be purpose. There has to be activity.’

‘He’s right,’ says Bale.

‘Okay,’ says Oll. ‘Okay, then we sing.’

‘We sing?’ Krank splutters.

‘Yeah, we sing together. Strengthens the mind. I’ll teach you a song. A hymn. In the old days, the faithful sang together to keep their spirits up and keep the daemons and the darkness out. We’ll do that.’

He teaches them the words. Just a verse or two, *O Lord and Master of Mankind*…

They start to sing, reluctantly. They fumble the words, forget a few, mangle the tune. Graft cannot hold anything but the one drone note. Oll keeps going at it, over and over, repeat and repeat, checking over his shoulder all the while, checking the tingle in his hands and the twitch of his eyelid.

That is all hymns and prayers were, back in the day, when real daemons walked the earth. They were utterances of protection, articulations of defiance. They joined people in the act of singing, joined their strengths, their beliefs. They made faith a weapon, if only a passive weapon – a shield at least. Or, indeed, at most.

Even for those who did not believe like Oll did, there were other benefits. Joined in singing, people were joined in activity. They were reminded that they were not alone. They were connected and bolstered. It gave them something to do, something to focus their minds on instead of fear. Last thing Oll needed was anyone panicking.

And sometimes singing is just noise, and it protects, like Orfeus protected them.

‘Keep going,’ Oll says. ‘Keep singing. Get to the end and start again. Keep singing.’

He turns and goes to the edge of the thorn thicket. Behind him, they are singing as loud as they can. He scans the brown sedge, and the hollows of the land that are already shaded with night. How many thousand battlefields has he surveyed this way, watching for the enemy to show himself? The land here reminds him of the moors beyond the Wall, when he was patrolling the parapets, watching for the

painted men. It reminds him of the rolling grasses of the Altai, watching for the approach of the Sarmatian riders. It reminds him–

His hands tremble.

M'kar is not down there at all.

M'kar is here, right at the edge of the thorn cage, looking in.

[mark: –?]

The thorns catch fire.

A stretch of the thorn brush three or four metres broad bursts into bright orange flame, burns up like paper, and spills into ash, leaving a gap big enough to drive a transport through.

Oll backs up, his hands trembling on the grip of his rifle.

It is dark out here, beyond the gap in the white thorn wall, as though a piece of midnight has arrived early. But there are eyes in it. He saw them looking in, ancient eyes for an ancient, feral mind, yellow slits with black slash irises. Glaring eyes. Evil eyes.

Eyes that stared forever from the prow of a ship.

Cursed eyes that mean the end of everything.

Oll backs away. He ignores the twitch and the itch and the tremble. He ignores the lump in his swallow, and the tears in his eyes.

In his long lives, he has seen plenty. He has never seen anything like this, though.

The daemon enters the thorn wood through the gap it has burned in the thicket. It bubbles in, like fluid, spilling over the boundary and collecting in the clumped soil. It is like tar. It smokes in the darkness. All Oll can see is the spreading wet stain of it on the ground, growing like a shadow. There is a bulk of it above, a monstrous, monolithic shape, a slice of darkness cut from pure night, super-heavy like spent plutonium. Above the eyes loom the impression of horns wider than an aircraft's wings.

He smells it. He retches.

In the seeping black pools around its feet, spider-leg stalks and spastic pseudopods sprout and fade, jutting briefly from the steaming tar and dying back like a time-lapse pict-feed of nocturnal weeds. It is a shadow, straining to exist.

Voices chirp and snigger. Oll hears the voices of people he knows on the wind, and realises they are lies. He hears the voices of people he has not seen alive in *thirty thousand years*. Lies. *Lies*.

He hears John's laugh. He hears Pascal at Verdun, asking for a light. He hears Gaius on the Wall, cursing the rain and praising the virtues of Galician girls. He hears Commander Valis whisper the name of a forgotten god as they both flinch from the nuclear light blooming across the Panpacific horizon. He hears a man question the quality of bronze stirrups in strongly accented Scythian. He hears Zaid Raheem, pinned in his burning T-62, begging to die. He hears the shocktroopers around him moan as the officer tells them that their objective will be the Brumman Hives. He hears Iason and Orfeus, singing together. He hears Lieutenant Winslow dictating his will the night before Copenhagen. He hears Private Labella whistling as she fries beans and eggs the morning after the Socal Basin fell.

He hears his son, five days old, crying lustily in his crib, the day that the Norsemen landed. As if he knew, five days old and *knew* what was coming.

Oll raises his rifle, slips the toggle to full-auto, and fires.

The advancing darkness ripples as his streaming shots strike it. The darkness absorbs the bright

bolts, but spatters too, each wound squirting fluid like milk.

The wounds vanish as fast as he makes them. The lactic blood fades. He cannot hurt it. It knows it, and he knows it. It does not just want him dead, it wants him broken. It wants his soul burned out with misery before it consumes him. It wants to anger him, wants him to feel rage and pain and frustration, and all the other human inadequacies of a thirty-five thousand year long life.

It knows he is a Perpetual.

Oll realises that suddenly, despite the pain robbing him of sense. He is caught up in the death of his son, a loss that took him three centuries to come to terms with, a loss he had pushed to the back of his over-stuffed mind, a loss M'kar has gone straight for, but even so, Oll *realises*.

It *knows* he is a Perpetual.

They would all be dead already, otherwise. It does not get to do this very often. It does not get to torment a being with such a great capacity for torment. Oll is a treat, a delicacy. All those heartless centuries of pain and loss and disappointment to tease out and relive, so many many more than a human life can encompass.

The pain is going to kill me, Oll thinks. *The very thought of me is going to kill me. To remember all I have ever been through will kill me stone dead.*

It will not be quick.

He stops shooting. His anger is as spent as his power cell. He throws his rifle aside. He turns his back on M'kar and walks away. He walks back to the others. They are still trying to sing, but it is not working.

'Keep going,' he urges, his voice breaking. 'Keep going… "forgive our foolish ways"… come on! Don't listen to it! Drown it out! Don't listen to its lies!'

He hears an old friend in a Dresden shop, chatting as he packs china in newspaper, 'in case the planes come tonight'. He hears his sisters calling his name from the cages on the caravan. He hears *Him*, the day they met, recognising a kindred being.

'*The likes of us*,' He says to Oll, '*the likes of us will leave our print on things down the ages. That is why we were made the way we were. The courses of our lives will not go unmarked*.'

'Mine will,' Oll assures Him. 'I have no stomach for the games you want to play with the world. I just want an ordinary life.'

'*My dear friend*, *you'll have as many of those as you want*.'

It was summer, a meadow beyond the walls of Nineveh. He had never met another Perpetual before. He would never meet another like Him.

Look at him now. After all this time, having turned his back on all those games, and never being a part of any of them, look at foolish old Oll Persson. Crossing the universe on a knifeblade for *his* sake. Running a fool's errand through the warp and weft of the cosmos to stop *his* games from unravelling.

M'kar comes closer, gurgling laughter in the darkness. The voices swirl around him like blossom, the voices of Oll's life. The pain, the lies.

Oll and his pilgrims are in a circle, their backs facing outwards. Oll's back is directly to the darkness.

'Don't look,' he says. 'Don't listen. Sing up. Drown it out.'

They have stopped singing, though. They just look at each other. Bale Rane is to Oll's right, Katt to his left. Oll places a hand on each of their shoulders.

'Don't look,' he says. 'It's going to be okay.'

It is not, but what else is he supposed to say?

The voices are in his ears. The pain of his life is unimaginable. He knows the others are hearing their own voices too. Bale can hear Neve. Zybes is begging his mother to stop calling out. Krank is crying about someone called *Pappi*. Katt is just shuddering. Oll does not want to know what she is hearing.

He takes his hand off her shoulder slowly. If there is a chance at all, it is coming and it is going to be miniscule.

'M'kar!' she barks, an involuntary sound.

'Shhhh,' he soothes her through his tears.

'*Mmmmkk!*' she blurts.

'Easy,' he says. He lowers his hand to his waist, to his belt, to the wrapped athame. He can feel the daemon's breath on the nape of his neck.

The athame is warm too.

One chance. One tiny chance.

'*Maloq!*' Katt squeals, eyes rolling back.

'Hush now,' Oll says, taking hold of the dagger.

'Maloq! Maloq! Maloq!' she screams. Meaningless. He has lost her. She has gone.

'Maloq Kartho!' she cries, and vomits. 'Maloq Kartho! M'kartho! *M'kar!*'

He has the dagger. One chance.

He wheels around, blade raised.

[mark: –?]

The thing is gone.

Only ordinary darkness surrounds them. The smell of it has gone, and the heat of it. The tar has vanished.

Only the voices remain, just for a minute or so, receding into the distance like whisperers moving away into a room beyond.

Oll blinks. He realises his mouth is open to scream, so he closes it. He feels sweat on his flushed face. He lowers the blade.

'I don't–' he starts to say.

He looks at the others. Bale is nursing the sobbing Krank. Zybes is sitting on the ground with his head in his hands. Graft has picked Katt up. She is limp.

'Oh God, no!'

She is not dead, though. There is vomit down the front of her clothes, and blood streaming from her nose.

'It went back,' she murmurs, looking up at Oll.

'Back?'

'Didn't you feel it? It was pulled back. It was yanked away from us, from here. It was needed somewhere else, for something more important than us.'

Oll shakes his head. He remembers John's words. *Keep away from it for long enough. It will eventually have to give up and turn back.*

'What in God's name?' Oll wonders, out loud.

'Maloq Kartho,' Katt says. Graft helps her to stand up. She is not steady.

'That's not a human name,' Oll says.

‘No, it is,’ she insists. ‘I feel it is. A transhuman name, at least. Whoever Maloq Kartho is, Maloq Kartho is why M’kar had to go and leave us.’

‘Then I pity poor Maloq Kartho,’ says Oll.

Katt shakes her head. ‘I don’t know why, but I don’t think you should.’

It has a destiny of its own.

[mark: –?]

Dawn breaks, soft over the thorn wood. The winds rise with it, rustling. Oll takes a bearing. He is pretty sure that the approach of M’kar was shielding them from the winds and prevented them getting a bearing.

The skies are clear, for now at least.

They have still got a long, long way to go, and it is not going to get easier.

‘What do we do?’ asks Zybes.

‘Do we keep going?’ adds Krank. ‘Do we have a route? A… direction?’

‘Boreas,’ Oll tells them, putting the compass and chart away. ‘The north-north-easterly. *Boreas*, or *Mese*, to the Grekans, at least. *Nordostroni* to the Franks. To the Romanii, *Aquilo*.’

He takes out the dagger and prepares to make the next cut. Their voyage will continue as it has been, like their lives and their destinies, unmarked.

That is why they might succeed.

‘So what do we do?’ asks Bale.

Oll puts his hand flat against the air and starts to cut.

‘We push on,’ he says. ‘Okay?’

I am sorry. I used to have faith. I used to believe that there was more to the universe, that there was more than what we could touch and see, that there was a power higher than all of us guiding us, keeping us safe. I never told you because I knew you would be angry, because you might leave. Now you are gone anyway, and I do not believe it anymore. I am sorry. I was right – there is another world beyond our dreams. I wish I could still believe it was a place of kindness. I do not want to go there.

N.

AFTERWORD

If you'll forgive one final pun, Calth certainly left its mark upon me…

It was just over a year ago that *Know No Fear* landed in my editorial email inbox. I knew that Dan Abnett had been working on it for some time, but I wasn't expecting anything to be handed in before the Christmas break. Considering how much of a Horus Heresy geek I've become in the last seven years or so, I actually knew relatively little about the battle which comes to define the Ultramarines as a Legion in the Horus Heresy, and so I really had no idea what to expect from the novel.

I can honestly say – and I think I Facebooked to this effect at the time – that this was the first Black Library manuscript I'd ever read that made me want to laugh, cry, puke, and bang my fists on the desk in frustration all at the same time. It was compelling, gripping, painful, cathartic stuff. There are sections of that book that feel like a gut-punch, and others that make you want to start a whole new gaming army right then and there. Seeing Guilliman and his sons skipping merrily towards the precipice with looks of blissful ignorance plastered all over their patrician features – it's like watching a documentary about a disaster, when you already know the ending. Far from being a straight-up military battle, this was bordering on sci-fi terrorism that quickly descends into warp-spawned madness.

One of my editorial comments to Dan at the time was something like: 'You've dropped in loads of plot hooks here – aren't you going tell some more of these other stories?' Of course, his only response was, 'Maybe one day… But who says it has to be me that tells them…?'

In my mind, at least, that was when *Mark of Calth* was born. The über-fan in me wanted to see the rest of Ventanus's legendary tale, and to find out just what the hell happened to the *Campanile*. I knew that there were still many hundreds of pages of plot left in the battles beneath the planet's surface, but the Horus Heresy always has a habit of moving on to the next big story and leaving a lot of the minor threads behind. This is where I think anthologies come in, since they provide a chance for short stories or novellas to pick up where the novels leave off, and vice versa. Speaking as an editor and following in the footsteps of *The Primarchs*, I'd like to see more anthologies themed towards specific characters or events as the Horus Heresy series continues.

The High Lords of Terra (that is to say, the authors) really took to this idea when we first tabled it for discussion. At the quarterly meetings at Games Workshop HQ, ideas began to take shape and sections of the Underworld War were marked out. Without even needing to add anything new into the mix, the existing continuity from *Know No Fear* and Graham McNeill's Warhammer 40,000 Ultramarines novels gave us some great starting points, and inspired a lot of the guys to get started straight away.

The interstitial snippets between the stories grew out of that initial rush of enthusiasm, too. There were so many story ideas flying around that we realised there wouldn't be enough pages to tell them all in full – given Guilliman's predilection for note-taking and reviewing events in detail (why does that feel so familiar?) I invited everyone to write 100-word mini-stories to represent all these little disparate fragments of 'evidence' after the fact. With a little prefacing note from the primarch himself, these become less like colour text and more like an additional narrative in and of itself; some of them relate indirectly to the stories they append, and some of them hint at far darker things still to come in the wider Heresy series…

For me, the continuity is what makes all of these stories really special, regardless of word count. It's the crossover, the opportunity for little references to be made across different plotlines; for recurring themes like flooding, daemonic possession or the presence of simple ritual daggers which crop up time and time again. The Horus Heresy has always been an awesome exercise in collaborative writing, but this really is something else. Having up to ten authors simultaneously working on the same bit of background not only facilitates plenty of holographic storytelling, but also lets each of them write in their own individual style.

I say 'ten' because, of course, the Mark of Calth is still running.

At the same time as these fine gentlemen were penning the material for this anthology, other stories were being written to further explore the battles between the Ultramarines and the Word Bearers. Gav Thorpe has outdone himself with the exciting audio drama *Honour to the Dead*, which really depicts the 'epic scale' of Titan combat; similarly Nick Kyme continues the saga of Aeonid Thiel – everyone's favourite bad boy in blue! – in *Censure*. Also, Dan and cover artist Neil Roberts have begun work on the magnificent graphic novel *Macragge's Honour*, which follows the naval duel between the Ultramarines flagship and Kor Phaeron's battle-barge, fleeing for the Maelstrom at the end of *Know No Fear*. Any and all of these stories could have been included as prose in this anthology, but this way we get enough Calth action to satisfy even the most impatient Horus Heresy fan.

Besides, who knows how many more Calth-based stories are out there, waiting to be told?

Well, I know, obviously. But as always – *I can't say*.

Laurie Goulding
December 2012

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DAN ABNETT is a multiple *New York Times* bestselling author and an award-winning comic book writer. He has written over forty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies. His Horus Heresy novel *Prospero Burns* topped the SF charts in the UK and the US. In addition to writing for Black Library, Dan scripts audio dramas, movies, games, comics and bestselling novels for major publishers in Britain and America. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent..

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DAVID ANNANDALE e is the author of the digital short story *Eclipse of Hope* and the novellas *Yarrick: Chains of Golgotha* and *Mephiston: Lord of Death* for Black Library. By day, he dons an academic disguise and lectures at a Canadian university on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games. He lives with his wife and family and a daemon in the shape of a cat, and is working on several new projects set in the grim darkness of the far future..

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AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN has written several novels for Black Library, including the Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach, The Emperor's Gift* and the *New York Times* bestselling *The First Heretic* for the Horus Heresy. He lives and works in Northern Ireland with his wife Katie, hiding from the world in the middle of nowhere.

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JOHN FRENCH is a writer and freelance games designer from Nottingham. His work for Black Library includes a number of short stories, the novellas *Fateweaver* and *The Crimson Fist* and the forthcoming novel *Ahriman: Exile*. He also works on the Warhammer 40,000 role playing games. When he is not thinking of ways that dark and corrupting beings can destroy reality and space, John enjoys making it so with his own Traitor Legions on the gaming table.

Guy Haley

GUY HALEY began his career on SFX Magazine in 1997 before leaving to edit Games Workshop's White Dwarf, followed by SF magazine Death Ray. Since 2009 he has been a wandering writer, working in both magazines and novels. He lives in Somerset with his wife and son, a malamute and an enormous, evil-tempered Norwegian Forest Cat called, ironically, Buddy.

Graham McNeill

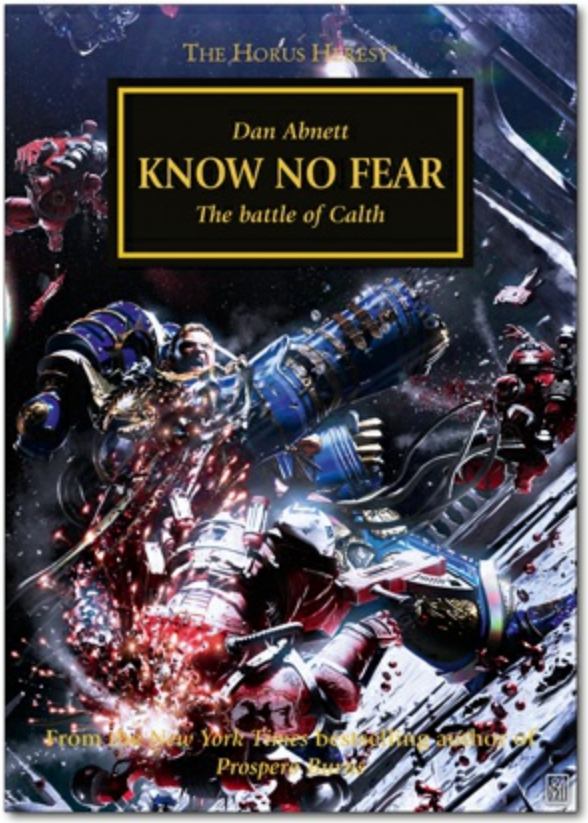
GRAHAM MCNEILL has written more than twenty novels for Black Library. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 *David Gemmell Legend Award*. Originally hailing from Scotland, Graham now lives and works in Nottingham.

Anthony Reynolds

After finishing university ANTHONY REYNOLDS set sail from his homeland Australia and ventured forth to foreign climes. He ended up settling in the UK, and managed to blag his way into Games Workshop's hallowed design studio. There he worked for four years as a games developer and two years as part of the management team. He now resides back in his hometown of Sydney, overlooking the beach and enjoying the sun and the surf, though he finds that to capture the true darkness and horror of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 he has taken to writing in what could be described as a darkened cave.

Rob Sanders

ROB SANDERS is a freelance writer, who spends his nights creating dark visions for regular visitors to the 41st millennium to relive in the privacy of their own nightmares, including the novels *Atlas Infernal* and *Legion of the Damned*. By contrast, as Head of English at a local secondary school, he spends his days beating (not literally) the same creativity out of the next generation in order to cripple any chance of future competition. He lives in the small city of Lincoln, UK.



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